鎌池和馬
イラスト／真早

インテリビレッジの座敷童（ざしきわらし）7

電撃文庫

インテリビレッジの座敷童⑦
鎌池和馬
電撃文庫

か-12-58

9784048651219

ISBN978-4-04-865121-9
C0193 ¥630E

ASCII MEDIA WORKS
アスキー・メディアワークス

KADOKAWA 発行●株式会社KADOKAWA

定価: 本体630円
※消費税が別に加算されます

1920193006308

インテリビレッジの座敷童(ざしきわらし)⑦

その滅亡は一本の線で繋がっていた。起こるべくして起こった百鬼夜行(ひゃっきやこう)と青行灯(あおあんどん)グループの正面衝突。犯罪装置パッケージなんてチャチなものじゃない、正真正銘の戦争。百鬼夜行の精鋭『五本指』と、それに対抗すべく栽木和(さいきかず)が喚び寄せる『最悪の天敵』。

でも、だったら俺の見てない所で勝手にやってくれよ！　……ああ、今回ばかりは本当にダメかもな、何しろ勝率0.00%とか言ってるし……ここからどう逆転すりゃ良いんだ。それはそうと座敷童(ざしきわらし)にもちゃんとお姉ちゃんやってた頃があったんですね！　どうしてこうなったのよぐーたら妖怪……!?

インテリビレッジの座敷童⑦

鎌池和馬 イラスト／真早

もくじ

序　章　010

第五章　陣内忍@VSツェリカ、突破口　020

第六章　陣内忍@油取り編・真　092

第七章　陣内忍@全面戦争、中央突破　238

第八章　陣内忍@変質、ある命の代償　328

終　章　352

デザイン／渡邊宏一（有限会社ニイナナニイゴオ）

青行灯メンバー

青行灯が自ら全国各地でスカウトしてきた『変化を望む者達』。
その目的のため標準型日本人DNA原器の簒奪を狙う。

百鬼夜行 五本指

祝が率いる、組織の中でも最強の実力を持つ五人組。
五本の指で五つの大陸を沈め、その掌で世界を掌握するとまで評価される。

「しっ、忍ちゃんを助けてください!!」
「うーかテメェ、何でまだ生きてんだ?」
陣内 隼(じんない はやぶさ)
忍の叔父さんで、正義感の強い茶髪高校生。いつもキナ臭い事件に首を突っ込んでいる。
「知らん」
菱神 樒(ひしがみ しきみ)
艶美や舞の血筋の原点たる、菱神筋の始祖と呼ばれる女性。専門は戦との話だが……?
「知らない女の人怖いぞ」
「ガーン! しらっ……?」
阿刀 美濃里(あとう みのり)
隼の通う高校の先輩で、生徒会長も務めている。忍と仲良くしようとするが、いつも失敗ばかり。
「初めまして、客人さん」
呪(まじな)
狭い業界に佇む青年。座敷童とも因縁浅からぬ関係らしいが?
「忍、炭酸を飲むなら一杯だけにしておきなさい」
座敷童・縁(ざしきわらし・ゆかり)
忍の家に居候している妖怪。ゲームばかりしており、どんな時代だろうが見た目は変わらない。
???
??????????
「?」
渚
忍と同じく小さな幼馴染み。まだ瞳は濁っていない様子。
「あっ、姉ちゃん! 姉ちゃんもシュワシュワ飲むか?」
「わひゃあ! ……よ、妖怪さんだ……(ビクビク)」
陣内 忍
インテリビレッジに住む……この姿は?

インテリビレッジの
座敷童⑦

鎌池和馬
イラスト／真早

Prologue

In all likelihood, it had been connected by a single thread from the beginning.

It was just that no one could see it.

Zashiki Warashi – Yukari

> “I would rather you didn’t shove all the battling onto a Zashiki Warashi. I am completely confident I would lose spectacularly to another Youkai and even to a human if they were Onmyouji class.”

Hafuri(?)

> “We are retrieving our former glory by taking back the Zashiki Warashi that left our house.”

Jinnai Shinobu

> “Fall down to the depths of the earth, Hyakki Yakou!!”

Succubus

> “Anyway, I was a character involved in all of this, so how about you reach out a loving hand to help me. More specifically, Hyakki Yakou proved more of a threat than I thought and I can’t seem to escape them, so shelter me here☆”

Each incident had been on a large scale and they had not had time to take a step back and view it as a whole.

They never considered that something lurked deeper inside.

Marguerite

> “I do not care about the economic damage the Australian government is so concerned about. I want to acquire the Succubus in your possession and rise to the position of the true witches of old.”

Marguerite

> “The witch Marguerite Steinhols and the demon Tselika Wien Alpha Chelydia Lumidrier now enter into an honest connection that crosses this honest world.”

Succubus

> “The real question is whether a witch who thought a Succubus would be a nice, safe option will be able to control a great demon that just barely did not rank on the level of a demon that symbolizes one of the seven deadly sins.”

The biggest cause would have been Zenmetsu Village ruled by the Toubyou.

But even that fact only becomes clear in hindsight. They had not had the time to think about it at the time.

Aoandon

> “This is the birth canal. Normally, I would have waited a bit longer, but you are special. I thought it would be best for you to face me before the rest of the world.”

Jinnai Shinobu

> “Then what about 110? Or how about 120? As the number leaves that perfect framework, the golden ratio holding your body together will crumble!”

Aoandon

> “Well. Just that way a bit.”

The past and future were caught in the middle as the dominos fell one by one.

Strange coincidences lined up and linked to a large inevitability.

Zashiki Warashi – Yukari

> “Hyakki Yakou Prototype Ver. 39 Zashiki Warashi. Hyakki Yakou attempted and failed to create a method of creating a completely different line of destiny from nothing.”

Sotobori Gaku

> “Believe it or not, the kid who killed that detective was only about ten. I’m a little embarrassed to admit it, but that’s what led me to become a detective.”

Aburatori

> “So what do you think the ‘original incident’ was? Do you remember, Jinnai Shinobu-kun? Do you remember just how you were torn to pieces?”

Aoandon

> “First, how about you tell me your name? I of course already know it, but I want to hear it from you.”

Saiki Kazu

> “Saiki Kazu. I am a former assassin, former fortuneteller, and former suicidal man, but now I am simply unemployed.”

And in the publicly managed casino at Goldmine Island, they suddenly found themselves swallowed up by a great current.

Just as one cannot jump from a train running at full speed, everything was carried to some place.

Sid Clouds

> “The trait of controlling pure gold was used to cause intentional connection issues in the semiconductors and destroy the smallest clusters within the financial trading system. Perhaps you could call it a national suicide Package.”

Hasukawa Yumi

> “I will be leaving this country for the time being. I feel bad for leaving behind those on our military bases, but if I stay here any longer, I will undoubtedly get dragged into the blue light issue.”

Hafuri

> “Risk simulation of a large scale terrorist attack. Increased possibility of fatal damage to a nation in the near future. The assumed enemy is a Japanese Spirit…the Blue Lamp?”

Jinnai Shinobu

> “The Aoandon!?”

It had finally begun.

But how many people had truly realized it?

Yonesaki Hiro

> “Ranzono-san isn’t that kind of person. She wanted to protect the Oomukade and Tsuchigumo that were her friends, so she wouldn’t be able to put my parents or my class in danger!”

Hishigami Mai

> “And the whole deal with the Oomukade and Tsuchigumo’s home smells fishy to me. A Package driving old people to a lonely death was active near Sugamo at the time. Maybe someone used that to corner Ranzono Sachi-chan.”

Byouki User

> “Ah ha. Amazing. You’re simply amazing! And yet I…I never had a single person think of me like that!!”

Illness Magic User

> “Enough. Once I settle all of this, you stand back up on your own two feet. I’ll be that special something for you.”

Ranzono Sachi

> “I…I can…help all my friends…”

Aoandon

> “Oh, c’mon. All I did was open the door to Sachi-chan’s heart. I’m not writing anything extra in there.”

Oomukade

> “Sachi!! …Understood. I will go with you, Aoandon. But I will almost certainly destroy your plan from within.”

Illness Magic User

> “Bringing them together would never make a cohesive fighting force.”

Saiki Kazu

> “No. They’ll most likely end up killing each other. But that’s fine as long as the battle provides the winner with enough experience points. In the end, it will still give us a powerful addition to our team.”

Hishigami Mai

> “Matsukai Hiroshi who was chopped in two was a member of the Aoandon’s team. He was creating a special program for the Aoandon.”

Mishima Jun

> “The national suicide Package from that special casino district was only one thing Nagatacho Station does. The deepest part of the station holds a secret server. All of Japan is there. But there was a vulnerability in the process of switching to the highest security level and they took advantage of it. It was in preparation to cause this attack on the infrastructure across Japan.”

Hishigami Mai

> “Don’t get cocky now, okay? I know you haven’t forgotten what happened when you tried to create a mass-produced paranormal unit meant to directly judge crimes involving Youkai.”

Mishima Jun

> “I know. And I can never repay the debt I owe to Hyakki Yakou’s previous generation. …It was my arrogance that led to that husband and wife’s death.”

Aoandon

> “The Japanese DNA Standard and the junk DNA created by the shared environment between multiple samples. If I get that, I can freely twist the definition of this country’s people. Was it stored in the mountains near Noukotsu Village? Now, it’s time for the ultimate entertainment!!”

Hafuri

> “We cannot allow the Aoandon’s group to steal that. Our destination is Noukotsu Village. Everyone, do whatever it takes to destroy them here.”

Saiki Kazu

> “Tselika Wien Alpha Chelydia Lumidrier. …Appear, Tsuerika Nyorai. It is time to begin your work.”

An archdemon that shot past the puny definitions of “Youkai” or “Spirits” roared in the center of that familiar village.

And a certain boy’s small world was destroyed.

Chapter 5: Jinnai Shinobu@VS Tselika, Opening

Part 1 (3rd person)

It was a tranquil rural scene.

As evening fell on the Intellectual Village, harvested paddies covered the ground and the mountains surrounding the village were visible far in the distance. The woods remaining here and there may have been to hold small shrines or just to make it look that way.

At six o'clock, that rural scene had been transformed into a battlefield of countless horrors thanks to the armies of Hyakki Yakou and the Aoandon's group. The battle had split into three large sections.

One was in one of the small wooded areas where Hyakki Yakou Leader Hafuri used the remote assistance of the Top 5 to directly clash with the Aoandon.

Another was on the golden earth left after the paddies had been harvested where the Top 5 were spread out with the members of the Aoandon's group collapsing at their feet.

The last was at the intersection of two farm roads between the paddy fields where Saiki Kazu had easily summoned Archdemon Tselika who had stolen the body of Australian Witch Marguerite Steinhols.

Jinnai Shinobu was with the Succubus, the Lantern Obake, and the Umbrella Obake when he saw the Saiki Kazu and Tselika scene play out.

Long, wavy blonde hair was tied back with a sky-blue ribbon and blindingly white skin caught his attention. Something that looked like rough gray concrete or reptilian scales covered sexy curves and yet seemed to intentionally leave the cleavage and navel exposed.

Two horns swept backwards from the forehead, bat-like wings extended from the back, and a thick tail swayed from just above the butt.

The woman had transformed into a stereotypical demon and she roared into the heavens.

That was all that happened, but it was enough for Jinnai Shinobu's entire world to be dyed crimson.

"…Ah…gwah…!!!???"

"Master!!"

The Succubus was right next to him, but her voice sounded hopelessly distant. Just as the world burned and the color red seemed to swallow up the entire village, Shinobu

was hit by a sharp headache like a thin wire connecting his temples was being pulled taut.

Only afterwards did he realize it was not the world that had been dyed. Tselika was not interfering with the laws of physics.

(Is it my eyes that are messed up!? Is the evening sunlight overpowering everything else I can see like a video camera with the brightness set wrong!?)

The images people saw were not actually produced by the eyes. The information received by the eyeballs was processed in the brain to create the three-dimensional images.

In that case, what was the source of the red Tselika was creating?

Using Marguerite's borrowed…no, stolen body, Tselika turned her head to look at Shinobu.

She had noticed him, observed him, locked onto him.

The previous headache vanished.

Then that demonic ruler filed her serpentine eyes with seduction, slowly licked her enchanting lips with the tip of her tongue, and spoke to this fresh human soul with a sweet aroma hanging around her.

"Oh, oh! If it isn't Jinnai Shinobu. You have my thanks for helping me obtain freedom by offering me this vessel of flesh."

Surprisingly, she spoke with the indifferent voice of a young girl.

When a short burst of gunfire interfered, the Illness Magic User glared in that direction. The Illness Magic he produced had the power and accuracy to corrode the bullets into dust even as they tore through the air. Even if those bullets contained a bizarre paranormal power.

As such, he was less interested in the actual gunfire than he was in who had caused it.

"Nh!!"

More gunfire followed. And this time, it slipped through the gaps in his mist of Illness Magic. Unlike before, he was force to hold out an arm to cover his vitals. After several dull impacts, a significant amount of blood flowed from his arm. He disintegrated the bullets inside his arm before their paranormal power could bare its fangs.

The man's expression did not change in the slightest.

He simply stared at and spoke to the attacker.

"What do you think you're doing, Venom Clairvoyant?"

She was another of Hyakki Yakou's Top 5.

The clear sound of bells followed.

His opponent was within twenty meters. She was a shrine maiden with long black hair and a red cloth covering her eyes. Poking out from her sleeves were old German handguns with wooden grips and fixed magazines. A decorative thread and bell were attached to the bottom of the grips and those bells would give a light jingle each time she danced with the firearms in hand.

Her violence took the form of a Kagura dance. The threads dangling from the gun grips and her almost divinely thin coat closed with a decorative clasp of St. John's wort drew circular paths as they decorated the stage known as the battlefield.

This woman was the only person with enough skill to accurately perceive the ever-flowing Illness Magic and fire through the gaps like threading a needle.

She was essentially shooting the Illness Magic User in the back as he worked to eliminate the Aoandon’s group, but what meaning did that action hold?

He focused on his armband. He had thought he would ever again be allowed to bear that symbol of Hyakki Yakou and he could not allow any action that would disgrace that family emblem.

Meanwhile, the Venom Clairvoyant asked the same question of him with some tension woven into her calm aura.

“I believe you are the one that needs to explain what you are doing.”

“?”

Even with her eyes covered, the young shrine maiden accurately pointed a handgun at the Illness Magic User’s right hand.

When he looked to that hand, he realized what she meant.

A skull was decaying in his hand, but based on the body, clothing, and equipment attached to it via a neck, this had been one of Hyakki Yakou’s combat members, not part of the Aoandon’s group.

(What!?)

He had not been shown any kind of illusion, but at some point his aim had shifted.

He was left speechless, so the Venom Clairvoyant slowly re-aimed her two handguns.

“I have called out to you several times already, but you apparently do not intend to listen. And all of those you returned to the soil were those who had chased after you because they looked up to you.”

“…”

“I can no longer trust you. Are you actually part of the Aoandon’s group? Or are you being subconsciously controlled? Either way, you must be defeated.”

“In that case,” cut in the Illness Magic User. “What do you have to say about the people scattered at *your* feet?”

“Eh?”

She froze in place as if she had only just noticed.

Splattered blood and fallen corpses covered the ground around her, but not even one of them belonged to the Aoandon’s group. They were all fellow Hyakki Yakou members.

“It would seem I wasn’t the only one being deceived,” said the Illness Magic User in a bitter voice.

If the same thing was occurring across the entire battlefield, it would truly be a scene of pandemonium. No matter how powerful Hyakki Yakou was – no, *because* of how powerful Hyakki Yakou was – no one would be able to stop this tragedy.

Something had severed the bonds between people.

Something had erased the distinction between enemy and ally.

And with that in mind, one primary issue came to mind.

“I can’t trust you anymore.”

“I can no longer trust you.”

Because they normally trusted the other’s strength enough to fight alongside them, these monsters knew just how dangerous they would be as enemies.

“Oh, now it’s really getting started.”

The Aoandon seemed to be enjoying herself all alone in the woods.

Annoyance filled Hyakki Yakou Leader Hafuri’s voice as the false image of her as an adult stood by her side.

“Did you use something to drive people mad and break the bonds connecting them?”

These enemies were white and black. The Aoandon wore the white kimono of a bride and Hafuri wore the deep black kimono of mourning.

“Tselika is known as an archdemon that didn’t quite get a spot as one of the seven deadly sins, but that isn’t because she was lacking in power.”

The Aoandon placed her index finger on her lips as if she were revealing a special secret. She showed no concern for Hafuri or the mourning clothes dyed with a family emblem.

“For one thing, there was no real reason to have exactly seven deadly sins. Some important person decided it should be seven, so the number and contents were reorganized. Any concept with the threat of harming the god they place their faith in was a candidate for being a deadly sin.”

“…”

“Yes! That’s right, that’s right! Tselika is far too powerful and controls far too many negative concepts to fit into that seven-sin framework!! Suspicion, hatred, crazed love, lies, and really anything else you might want. She controls everything that corrupts otherwise upstanding people! She has free control over all of those things that cause one to betray god!!”

No matter how powerful and solid an organization Hyakki Yakou was, its loyalty was still directed toward a person. Tselika had the power to make people reject god, so the bonds of that group were no guarantee.

“Do you really think something like that is enough to defeat us? Do you really think we’re going to hand over the Japanese DNA Standard and sit idly by while you overwrite the definition of all the Japanese?”

“Ha ha. Young lady, what do you think you can even do?”

A dark smile appeared on the Aoandon’s face.

“All of your power is supplied remotely by your Top 5, isn’t it? That might give you a spare adult body, accurate precognition, superhuman combat skills, and a rapidly cultivated sword, but Hyakki Yakou has broken apart. Your Top 5 are no exception, so you have lost that special power.”

A moment later, the doll standing next to the young Hafuri crumbled with the sound of squashed mud. The Japanese sword fell with a solid sound and it had lost its dreadful shine. Like waking from a dream, the girl returned to being a mere girl.

“What do you want so badly?” Hafuri merely narrowed her eyes a little. “You destroyed infrastructure across Japan, you illegally accessed the server hidden at Nagatacho Station, and you’re trying to steal the Japanese DNA Standard. …Your methods are over-the-top, but I can’t tell what your overall objective is. What change do you want to make to the Japanese using that?”

“Ah ha ha. And if I told you I didn’t want to do anything?”

“…”

“Don’t give me that look. What I want is simple.”

The Aoandon giggled with a bluish-white phosphorescence burning at the tip of her single horn.

“I want to give a single command: *Erase the Japanese*.”

A terribly cold wind blew between the two of them.

It sounded like a joke, but when the Japanese DNA Standard was combined with the paranormal powers of the Aoandon and her group, the possibility was all too real. Just as injuring a straw doll would injure a human body, that would affect every single person in the category of “Japanese”.

“I was not asking ‘how’; I was asking ‘why’.”

“I am the being that exists beyond the collection of one hundred fears, so you could say I am a collection of the people’s desires. What I want is what everyone wants.”

“Everyone wants…to erase the Japanese…?”

“Well, yeah. Who needs Japan?” The Aoandon made it sound simple. “I don’t know if you’re supposed to call it ‘Nihon’ or ‘Nippon’, but let’s be honest, who needs it? And I’m not talking about this from the point of view of America or China. I’m saying even your fellow Japanese don’t want Japan anymore☆”

“…”

“I mean, it’s rotten to the core, isn’t it? It only looks nice and bright on the surface, but peel back that top layer and you’re in for a surprise. Do you really think people want to keep protecting this rotten tree to the end? Do you really think they all feel that way? Japan’s GDP recovered and it’s second in the world now? But all that wealth goes to the Intellectual Villages and the people in the cities keep seeing their standard of living drop. You’ve set up United Hive to gather all the best patents from the small town workshops so you can negotiate on equal footing with international corporations? But that means you can’t do business on your own and will dry up without the cooperation of that giant corporation. You reversed the low birthrate? But now the population is up to 150 million! You’ve had to set up systems for people to abandon others like those Ubasute Apartments. All you have is more people who do nothing but suck your taxes dry. Think about it rationally, and they’re just a financial burden. In fact, your national debt keeps rising as time passes, but you keep making up new words to throw them into random categories that only make it look like you solved the problem. Japanese pride? Japanese technology? Services only the Japanese can provide? You’re all just sitting in front of the TV getting turned on thinking about it! But what can you actually do while you’re sprawled out in your living rooms? Not a damn thing, right? That’s why you can’t get into an Intellectual Village and are stuck in your apartments that are more like honeycombs than rabbit hutches! Even if you tried at an apprenticeship for some luxury brand, they’d kick you out for being completely useless! Besides, there are tons of craftsmen and artisans outside of Japan. Their skills are world class too; you just haven’t been told about them! And this gap between the idea and reality – between your pride and your skill – goes beyond an individual level. The Nihon on TV and the Nippon in reality keep moving further and further apart. Isn’t that scary? You keep stretching that rubber band, but you will eventually pass the point of no return and it’ll snap. That ‘proud Japan’ will be stripped from you and you’ll be nothing but a group of incompetents who held vicarious pride in what others did. Not many people can still sit around unconcerned as they see that rubber band stretching so tight. They’re all afraid. They really are. They have enough sense leftover to be afraid. So can you at least understand why they might subconsciously want a nice clean reset of it all☆”

Each and every piece of that explanation may have been something one could find in the cities. This may have only been a collection of all those opinions.

But the actual actions and conclusion she reached simply did not follow.

“Is that what you…what your group wants? The humans working with you are Japanese too. If you complete your plan, they’ll be ‘erased’ too. They know that and they still-…?”

“Of course not,” nonchalantly replied the Aoandon. “They all have their own desires. They might want to be with their friends, they might want to exterminate ‘good’ for being too weak and create a powerful ‘justice’ to replace it, they might just want money, or they might want a group to belong to. They have a variety of reasons.”

“Then-…”

“But.” The Aoandon drowned out Hafuri’s words to continue. “All of those various desires have their basis in dissatisfaction, right? That simplifies matters. The fastest method to fulfill those desires and remove that dissatisfaction is to *erase all of the people who hold them*. With that one simple move, all of the dissatisfaction in their hearts will be gone. Simple, right?”

She was insane.

She was completely insane.

Humans and Youkai may have looked similar, but they were entirely different lifeforms. That would create a different basis of thought, but this was different yet again. Hafuri had met people who used paranormal powers that could easily slay those Youkai, but even she had been unable to peer a single millimeter inside the Aoandon’s chest.

The monster laughed.

“Are you about ready now?”

“Do you think using your archdemon to sever Hyakki Yakou’s bonds is enough to defeat us?”

“Heh heh. There’s no need to act tough, young lady. Tsuerika Nyorai’s rank would be the same as Rahu or Mara, so she’s a legit demon lord. If Tamamo or Daji would be enough to give you trouble, you don’t stand a chance against this enemy.”

But…

“That is not what I was talking about.”

“?”

“*What is that in your right hand?*”

The Aoandon looked down at her hand.

It was stabbed into the center of someone’s chest.

The person was the young woman behind the Ubasute Apartments that the Aoandon had picked up because she seemed interesting. Her name was Yamame and she had a large scar on her mouth, but she was dead now that her heart had been utterly crushed.

The Aoandon had done that, but when had she done so?

“It may be true that this Tselika you summoned is powerful. Her power might easily exceed that of Shuten Douji or the Kurama Tengu.”

The blue female oni remained motionless as Hafuri gave her cool-headed explanation.

“But can you really control her? If not, we will not be the only ones to fall in the face of this disaster.”

Part 2

I was caught off guard.

I had forgotten how to describe it.

A hellish scene of mutual destruction filled the harvested rice paddies around me. This was true bloodshed and all distinctions between enemy and ally had been lost.

One side seemed to be Hyakki Yakou.

The other side was less recognizable, but I could see the Aoandon a ways away.

“You damn lantern! You’re ripping off my one-eyed look!!”

“How dare you!? And Hiro-sama only needs one Obake by his side!!”

The Lantern and Umbrella began a scuffle that sounded like two paper fans being beaten together. Seeing that change come over those two friendly Youkai was what clued me in to what was happening here.

Tselika had roared, my vision had been dyed red, and something had directly set to work in my brain and heart.

Was she the cause of this madness?

With a man in a dark suit by her side, the bewitching archdemon narrowed her serpentine eyes and used the witch’s slender fingertip to slowly beckon me over.

“I said you have my thanks, did I not? Do not worry, Shinobu. Come closer. I truly feel like rewarding you.”

That was all she said, but my body ignored my will and began walking forward like I was being pulled by countless fishing hooks stabbed into my brain. With each step closer, the red in my vision grew deeper.

There was no pain. In fact, my senses were vanishing, which was much more frightening.

“Master!!”

“Good, good. There is nothing to be afraid of. Now I have you. Hm, you try to act tough, but you have the soul of baby. Lovely, lovely.”

The next thing I knew, Tselika had her hands on my cheeks. Instead of pressing her palms against me, she smoothly brought her fingertips in close like just those fingers were being sucked into the sides of my face. At the same time, I could tell my knees were growing weak and about to give out.

But not from fear.

“Hmm, there is no need to be so stiff. Here, I will show you a sign of my affection.”

In the middle of that pandemonium of mutual destruction, Tselika almost jokingly wrapped her hands around my neck and gently embraced me. She was borrowing Marguerite’s body, so this stuck my face between her ample breasts.

More than the warmth and softness, it was the sweet aroma that soaked deep into my brain.

Something burst deep inside my nose.

At first, I thought I had a runny nose or something, but I was wrong.

I wiped at my nose and found a red liquid on the back of my hand.

“…You’re…kidding.”

I thought getting a bloody nose from porn only happened on TV.

If it’s actually happening, doesn’t that mean some kind of circuit in my head broke!? Is my body being invaded by something that bad!? Just from this sweet aroma that smells like an extreme concentration of sugar, condensed milk, and honey!?

“Oh, dear. Oh, dear. It’s been so long I forgot how to control myself. Please forgive me. Hm, I thought thanking you with my body would be the demonic thing to do, but it would seem that would be a little too toxic for you. Now, what should I do instead?”

“Tsuerika Nyorai.”

The man in a dark suit cut in with a gloomy voice.

He was most likely on the Aoandon’s side.

“You can play around after fulfilling your contract. For one thing, that is an enemy of the Aoandon. If you do not intend to finish him off, then I would like to provide him his last rites myself.”

“Hm.” Tselika hardly seemed to care as she continued to hold my paralyzed body close. “Your name is Saiki Kazu, correct?”

“Yes.”

“I was summoned via a contract with you, so I am perfectly willing to help you defeat this Hyakki Yakou group just as you desire. Keep that in mind first and foremost.”

Her words flowed on.

“But that contract requested that I defeat your enemy. It said nothing about protecting you.”

She seemed to overturn everything.

“So I see no reason to worry about your lives.”

“!?”

Before Saiki Kazu could react, Tselika breathed a sweet breath from between her seductive lips.

That was all she did.

“To be honest, you are an eyesore. Perhaps I should reheat that cooled mind of yours.”

A great sound rang out.

It was the sound of Saiki Kazu using every last ounce of strength in his left hand to restrain his right hand which attempted to point two fingers at his temple like a gun.

“My deadly sins cause people to betray even god, so having them betray themselves could not be simpler. For one thing, the violence and fear you wield are nothing but tools to produce but one of the emotions that lead people to betray god. You are essentially showing off your brand-new chess set without even understanding the rules, so do you really think you could outdo a master chess player such as myself?”

“Tsuerika!!”

“Oh? Are you sure you should focus on me? You are but one piece of entertainment here.”

As if to supply an additional blow against the shouting man in a dark suit, a flamethrower-like attack blasted in from a completely different direction. All cooperation was gone, a complete free-for-all had broken out, and it had descended into a chaotic hell, but all of that chaos seemed to obey Tselika’s will. Just like iron sand following a line of magnetism. Pursued by this new attacker, Saiki Kazu was forced to leave us and run off into the battlefield.

This was on an entirely different level.

I had run across plenty of monsters in the past, but a greater quantity or quality of the paranormal had been enough to wash them away. Just like Hyakki Yakou would do. However, Tselika was fundamentally different. Even if she was faced one million or one billion people, she could drive them all mad and lead them to destruction. Superior numbers meant nothing to this archdemon.

She had to be defeated in an individual battle.

But was there any individual who could even hope to defeat this kind of monster?

“Good, good. Shinobu, your soul is giving off a wavelength of desire. I can sense your desire to outdo me and – if possible – harm me.”

“…!!!???”

My throat instantly went dry, but Tselika simply laughed.

The demon pressed her forehead against mine like a mother checking on her child’s temperature.

“I said ‘good’, did I not? This too is entertaining. Human desire is a truly pleasant thing and it has pulled me from a sea of boredom. Good, Shinobu. You will serve me well.”

That was wrong.

That was completely wrong, but I was on the way to boarding those rails.

Even the faintest breath from this close was enough to nearly smash my thoughts to pieces.

I felt like I had been thrown into an ocean of aphrodisiac, so I desperately tried to escape that feminine smell and warmth to free myself from that depravity.

“What happened…to Marguerite…to the Australian witch…?”

“Oh, oh! Leave it to my loyal servant to know where the true fun lies!! That woman you offered up to me has not gone to waste. Her vessel of flesh has helped free me as you can plainly see, but her soul has provided truly delectable and enjoyable entertainment.”

As she spoke, Tselika pulled her forehead back from mine.

From the overwhelming distance of only a few centimeters, she snapped her fingers with the look of someone revealing the present they had hidden behind their back.

Immediately, pitch black scenery appeared to the side. And I don’t mean that figuratively. I could only imagine space itself had been torn open.

From inside, I heard a disturbing sound that resembled a quiet whistling or a chilly wind blowing through a gap in some rocks.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhahhhh…”

Or so I thought at first.

But before long, I realized it was a voice, not a mere sound.

As soon as I realized that, my understanding was turned on its head and blown away like the worst kind of trick art.

“Help me, help me, help me, help me, help me!! Please, I beg you! Give me back my body! How can you keep me as a bare soul!? It’s cold, dark, cramped, and scary… Where even am I? What is that crawling around here!? My soul is rotting… It’s rotting, rotting, rotting, rotting!! It really is directly rotting!! Sob, sob. Don’t you know this is even crueler than grabbing my organs with filthy, germ-ridden hands!? Please forgive me. Please just forgive me already!! When will it end? When will you finally kill me? How many days, months, or years has it been? …It’s been five hundred years hasn’t it? No, it’s probably been five thousand years, hasn’t it!? Sob, sob. It’s painful, pitiful, and pathetic. I can’t stand to see myself begging and trying to please you in the off chance you’ll forgive me if I’m a good girl. And that’s what I’m supposed to hate that more than anything!! It’s disgusting and my color is changing… Hey, the color of my soul is seeping out, but what does that actually mean!? It hurts… Help me, mommy!! Sob, sob. Is someone there? Are you watching me? Why won’t you kill me? Don’t you have a conscience? Are my questions so

meaningless they amuse you? I can't stand anymore of this!! Yes, I worshiped the devil! Yes, I went to Japan for selfish reasons! Yes, I transformed the Furutsubaki! Yes, I stole the Succubus! And yes, I tried to kill an innocent high school boy! But!! Do I really deserve this!? Just kill me! Give me the death penalty or whatever else! Just stop stealing the color of my soul… I don't have anything else left, so please don't take any more of that away from me!! My soul really, really will crumble away!!"

She was not speaking Japanese, but it was not Australian English either.

The voice simply permeated my mind.

…What the hell is this?

It was true we had been lost in the moment when that Australian witch had attacked.

Even if it had been part of the plan, the Succubus had stabbed me, so I hadn't had room to focus on anything else.

So we had set a trap and desperately grasped at victory.

It had all been so we could smile and return to our normal lives.

The Zashiki Warashi and the Succubus hadn't rescued me to bring about this kind of cruelty!

"Phew…"

Tselika let out a sweet breath from so close it caused my spine to shudder.

"Can you hear it, Shinobu? Thanks to this, my nights have been far from boring. And it was all thanks to you providing me with the witch named Marguerite Steinhols, so make sure you enjoy it too."

"…"

"Now, then. My choice of background music is over, so let's get back to talking about your reward. Paying you back with my body would probably fry your brain, so would you accept being given the perfect front-row seat?"

A strange sweat seemed to pour from my brain itself and my tongue had gone numb, so I couldn't speak properly.

Still, I somehow managed to voice the question in my mind. All the while, I felt a vague fear that being unable to ask this would mean I was no longer human.

"Front…row…seat?"

"Indeed. …A front-row seat to what I call the Hyakki Yakou and Aoandon Group Mutual Destruction Show!! How about that? Gets your spine tingling, doesn't it?"

I couldn't believe it.

This went beyond Marguerite. To this demon, were human blood, fear, and death no different from the events of a movie or drama? Could she line up the corpses in the

same way movies advertised themselves as having cost tens of billions of yen to produce?

“Good. I can feel it in your wavelength of desire. You were angry seeing your hometown overrun by such overwhelming and unreasonable violence, were you not? You wanted these crass outsiders to leave, did you not? But you had no way of making it happen. Not to worry, though. I will supply you with one. Think of this reward as just one drop in the bucket of infinite thanks I owe you.”

Looking only at the result, this may have been in line with what I had wanted.

I had indeed wanted to drive these strangers from Noukotsu Village.

But her method had a definitive difference from what I had wanted.

I had wanted peace. I had wanted my normal life back. I had wanted to be manipulated by the Zashiki Warashi, Yuki Onna and the others, to have stupid discussions with Madoka and Nagisa at school, and to have my normal home and school in their normal places. That would have been enough for me.

So why was that desire causing it all to sink into a swamp of madness and joy?

I didn’t need any of that icy entertainment found in seeing slaves and lions fight to death at the Colosseum or in seeing a criminal decapitated at the public square. Even if it was still a means of “ending this conflict”, this path and my own path would never, ever coincide. Tselika was so overwhelmingly insane that I was absolutely certain of that fact.

So I managed to squeeze out some meaningless words.

“…To hell…with that…”

In truth, what could I have even done there?

This monster was making fools of Hyakki Yakou as a whole. Packages were one thing, but what could a mere high school boy even do in a direct fight against any kind of Youkai, demon, or paranormal existence? Shooting them or stabbing them was useless. Imprisonment was meaningless when they had no lifespan and there was no way to execute them, so no laws could be made to punish them. What could a human do against Tselika?

Meanwhile, Tselika narrowed her serpentine eyes from close range while using Marguerite’s seductive body. The concrete-like gray scales that did not bother actually covering her skin wriggled so freely I started to suspect they were her true form.

And she spoke.

“…Oh?”

A moment later, a tremendous roar rang deep in my head. My senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch were all blown away. The overwhelming explosion of my senses made me think my brain had been kneaded like clay. This time, the entire world was so filled with crimson that I couldn’t even see Tselika’s face a few centimeters away.

There was no pain.

But something was so cloyingly sweet that it shot past all my limits and made me sense death. A cold sweat poured down my face as I seriously wondered when my rampaging heart was going to burst.

“Bfwah!? Fwah!! Gwah!
Oeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

“I would recommend not angering me too much, Shinobu.”

I felt like a bundle of pathways had been severed in my head.

The world around me was buried, but Tselika’s voice alone remained oddly clear.

This was not an issue with my ears or eardrums. She might have been messing with my brain directly.

“The master is rewarding her loyal servant. Refusing that reward is no different from disgracing and shaming that master’s reputation. Well, it is true times have changed, so you would not have had a chance to learn such etiquette. With that in mind, I will be kind and forgive you just this once. Do you understand what that means, Shinobu?”

“Pant, pant…!! Kwah!?”

With Tselika’s exasperated comment, the world finally returned.

I could not breathe properly and my mouth opened and closed with only groans escaping, but Tselika thoroughly wiped off my face with her fingers and palms.

“Oh, how pitiful. I know you must be brimming with joy, but you don’t have to let it pour from your eyes and ears as well as your nose and mouth. Hee hee. Stay still and I will clean you up.”

It sounded like a joke, but Tselika’s hands were already stained red. It was my own blood and it was flowing from my mouth, nose, eyes, and ears. I could still smell the sweet aroma that was reminiscent of a melted mixture of sugar, condensed milk, and honey, but how much of that lethal concoction had I been exposed to?

I could not win.

The source of it all stood right in front of me and I could easily reach out and touch her. If I did not stop the intense fighting surrounding me, the bloodshed and tragedy would spread without end. This had likely left the carefully-laid plans of the Aoandon’s group, so it would continue on to the final station without any hope of being stopped.

I knew all that, yet I had not the slightest clue where to even begin.

What could I possibly do against a monster like this!?

Part 3 (3rd person)

A slender young man stood in the rural scenery wearing a black butler's uniform and glasses. He held a riding crop as he faced a girl in a greenish-brown twelve-layered kimono. She covered her mouth with a fan, but that was not enough to hide the embers escaping her mouth and blowing in the wind.

They were the Supernatural Trainer and the Passionate Predator.

They bore the same family emblem on their tiepin and spread fan.

They were both one of Hyakki Yakou's Top 5, but they were currently split into individuals who were devouring each other.

It began with the kimono-wearing Passionate Predator.

Each time her body swayed to the left and right, the black hair behind her would wriggle like a living creature. It almost looked like a large serpent thinking about how to torment its prey.

"Ahh, ahh!! I can feel the throbbing… Ahh, once this happens, ahh, ahh, I can't hold back, ahh!!"

"Tch. The perverted professional stalker is already writhing from her phantom pregnancy."

"Ahh, say whatever you like!! You know perfectly well, ahh, ahh, this is how I become a precision guided weapon that can hunt down any target with 100% accuracy!!"

The girl took in an exceptionally large breath, but she was not preparing to yell.

Fire burst from her mouth like a flamethrower.

In the blink of an eye, a straight line was burned through the harvested paddy field. The scattered wave of heat transformed the dirt into glass. That flame of passion slithered like a snake, branched out, and flew toward the butler like a cluster of missiles.

But that target vanished in an instant.

He had moved over ten meters in a single bound. The Passionate Predator continued breathing fire regardless, so the Supernatural Trainer made leap after leap to reach safety before the flames enveloped him.

The kimono girl cried out at the light movements.

"Ahh, ahh! Is that the Hassou-Tobi!?"

"Ushiwakamaru learned the technique from the Tengu, so did you really think I would be unable to reproduce it with my mastery of training techniques?"

"Ahh, but, ahh!!"

She breathed out the flames with more than twice the previous intensity. Failing to capture him and being ignored only caused her passion to grow.

"The more what I want escapes and the more I fail to reach them, the more violent my flames grow!! Just as intense passion transformed a woman's body into a giant

serpent and she burned down a divinely protected temple to get at the priest who had cast her aside!!”

In other words, if he did not flee, the flames would surround him, but the more he fled, the more the flames would grow. They would grow without end until they finally caught up and burned him to death.

(Now, what should I do?)

The Illness Magic and Heirloom had lost their senses too. While taking extreme evasive actions to escape the girl’s flames which had grown into a small scale volcanic eruption, the Supernatural Trainer thought sarcastically to himself.

(If only there was a Youkai that taught how to handle women. Why do they only ever teach serious academics and martial arts!?)

Elsewhere, the other group was also devouring itself.

The ten year old girl named Ranzono Sachi and the Oomukade were not up against their enemies in Hyakki Yakou. It was the Byouki User, another member of the Aoandon’s group. She was a girl wearing a yellow mini-China dress, a blue cat-ears coat, and bandages on her face and leg. The character-adorned bandages and the knee sock on just one leg seemed more creepy than cute.

“Ah ha! Ah ha ha!! Heyyy, you came here to show off all your friends, didn’t you? You wanted to make fun of me for being all alone, didn’t you? Hee hee. That’s fine. That just means I have to make this a night to remember. How about I have all your limbs rot off so you have to crawl around like a worm!?”

“It would seem there is no convincing her. Sachi, stay back! Her Byouki is nowhere near as lethal as my venom!!”

The Oomukade was nervous, but he thought he was looking in the same direction as Ranzono Sachi.

But he was wrong.

He was completely wrong.

Her eyes moved in a disturbingly jerky way as they silently viewed the Oomukade. Coloration, optical illusions, and makeup had been used to transform the girl’s face beyond recognition, but the violence below the surface could not be hidden.

She looked like a beast watching its prey.

The white rose corsage on the side of her head swayed as unreliably as a withered flower.

“……
……”

“Sachi? Sachi!! Damn, has it gotten to her too!?”

Even as he shouted that, his thoughts led him to a different answer.

(No, can I even say it isn't affecting me? Being this cautious about Sachi might be part of the illusion making me view her as an enemy.)

What was true and what was false? Who was an ally and who was an enemy? He had to question even that in this world of oozing and messy chaos.

And in that world, a small girl spoke.

"*Come.*"

The ground exploded.

Dirt burst into the air and several creatures climbed up to the surface: a spider measuring several meters across, a serpent easily over ten meters long, and a giant frog with horns growing from its head. None of them would be found in an encyclopedia of animals. They were true Youkai, just like the Oomukade.

"A Tsuchigumo, Uwabami, and Gama? Did Sachi summon them!?"

Children and Youkai had always been compatible. There were a lot of Youkai that could only be seen by children or that only targeted children because they would the other to them. To the Oomukade, that trait seemed stronger in Ranzono Sachi than normal.

But this was the first time he had seen her use it so intentionally.

She had nearly become a summoner. Even if she had no power herself, she would be a serious threat if she could continue summoning nearby Youkai without end. It would be too much for a single Oomukade to handle.

He had completely lost sight of the situation.

And just as he realized that, an even greater impact reached him.

A deluge of black Illness Magic surged in between Ranzono Sachi and the Byouki User.

A large gloomy man wearing the special black combat outfit of a SWAT member stood alongside the Oomukade.

"You seem to have remained saner than the rest here. To be honest, it makes me wonder why you would have joined the Aoandon."

"I have no excuse. That blue oni stole Sachi's heart, but I…"

He trailed off and fell silent.

He had two reasons. First, the deluge of Illness Magic had been torn apart from within and the Byouki User stood beyond it with a dark smile on her lips.

Second, the seemingly composed Illness Magic User asked a certain question.

"Which way am I facing right now?"

"What?"

“I am not confident I can remain on anyone’s side for long. Even if I infect my own brain with Illness Magic to keep myself fighting semi-automatically.”

With the clear sound of bells, a young blindfolded shrine maiden arrived from a different direction. The man faced those two formidable foes, the Byouki User and the Venom Clairvoyant, and he made a blunt statement.

“I do not know when I will betray someone, so if you want to survive, do not trust me. Think of it as using me.”

The battle had spread beyond the surface.

Six strategic stealth bombers and an airborne warning and control aircraft that should not have existed in Japan flew in the sky above Noukotsu Village. A formation of defense fighters flew with them to protect them.

A commotion had broken out among them, as if someone had poked the hornet’s nest.

Supposedly allied military aircraft and even the humans inside the same aircraft began fighting one another. The ugly conflict was gradually accelerating.

Finally, the catastrophe crossed a certain line.

One of the bombers seemed to lose its balance and then flew in a straight line toward the surface. No, it had lost control and was falling. The pilots were fighting each other and had completely forgotten something as basic as righting their own aircraft, so it had essentially become a giant bomb in and of itself.

Part 4

“Whoops.”

Tselika was entirely carefree, but I was anything but.

A V-shaped flying wing crashed into the paddy fields with a deafening noise. It slid along, tearing into the ground for several hundred meters, and it finally exploded. Tselika stood tall all the while, but I was blasted into the air. By the time I realized landing was going to hurt, my back collided with the ground and I had trouble breathing.

“Bah…ahh!! Aghh…gh!!”

My consciousness wavered, but that was not just due to the damage.

An airplane had crashed inside the village. The perfectly maintained Intellectual Village scenery had been destroyed. Jet fuel and other harmful substances had been scattered across the dirt.

What would happen to the village?

What would happen to the Intellectual Village brand name!?

“Master, are you okay?”

The Succubus whispered from nearby.

She lifted me up and wrapped her arms around my neck to embrace me. The red scenery of amplified twilight that Tselika had created – or perhaps that a malfunction in my brain had created – was receding somewhat. The oppressive feminine aroma and the gentle warmth that threatened to drag me into eternal darkness had both been swapped out for a different sensation.

“Heh hah hah hah hah!! Good, good, Henrietta. Did you remove his pain by overwriting his desire with a different desire? That’s much better than trying to use some scriptures filled with sickening ideals. What you did is more like watering down tequila with beer. It’s so wonderfully degenerate.”

Henrietta? Oh, is that the Succubus’s real name?

I could see the Succubus biting her lip nearby. I had no idea what exactly it meant for a demon to have her name revealed, especially if it was carelessly revealed by a third party.

“But I’m jealous. Of course, that’s another type of desire, so it too is pleasant. If I was as weak as you, I could have reveled in the freedom to-…hm?”

Tselika frowned and her serpentine eyes looked to her feet.

A small canine Youkai was rubbing up against her long, slender leg. The Youkai looked intoxicated and about ready to pass out, but it seemed to be a Sunekosuri.

Wait. A Sunekosuri?

If he’s here…!

“(Yes, it means I’m here too.)”

A voice whispered to me from behind.

Hishigami…Mai!?

I just about turned around, but both the Succubus and Mai pinched my butt. Mai then used her index finger to write on my back.

“Don’t turn around. She’ll notice.”

“What’s the matter?”

Tselika looked puzzled, but she did not seem to have noticed Mai’s presence.

At first I thought she was hidden by my body, but that couldn’t possibly be.

Mai did not hesitate to stand up and walk right past me.

And yet…

“It’s…nothing. I just have a killer headache.”

“I see. It’s interesting that seduction can be *too* powerful.”

Nothing was hiding Mai, so it seemed Tselika simply couldn’t see her. It went beyond merely hiding one’s presence. What did one have to do to reach this level? Mai may have been afraid of my eyes giving away the location of what Tselika could not see for herself.

Having so thoroughly erased her presence, Mai boldly but silently walked right up next to Tselika. She circled around the archdemon as if admiring a sculpture.

If she could do that, she could launch whatever surprise attack she liked.

That woman was a true monster. I finally started seeing some hope, but then the Succubus wrote on my back with her fingertip.

“We have no trump card.”

“…”

You’re kidding, right?

She could freely approach within a centimeter of the enemy. She could freely attack her from any angle. She could stab through her eyeball, split her head open, or pierce her heart. She had whatever opportunity she wanted.

But was even Mai helpless in this situation?

Could that monster not harm Tselika?

“Shinobu, you seem to have recovered, so come closer. Marguerite’s screams were nice, but my swollen soul is aching for a man’s wavelength.”

When she seductively beckoned me over, I seriously think I nearly suffered a stroke or a subarachnoid hemorrhage. I gulped, slowly freed myself from the Succubus’s arms, and walked unsteadily toward Tselika.

“By the way.”

That was when she giggled and asked me a question.

“Shinobu, you are hiding something from me, are you not?”

———————

Is it over already? Is the hope I saw vanishing, can we not hide Mai’s presence, and is it all falling apart!?

“I can tell from your soul’s wavelength that you have latched onto some kind of hope. But what exactly is it? What made you start thinking you have a chance of defeating me? Heh heh. Good, Shinobu. Just how much are you going to let me enjoy this? Keh heh heh.”

More than suspicion or hatred, she expressed the joy of a child trying to understand a magic trick or solve a riddle.

Mai had circled behind me and her finger raced across my back: “We don’t have time.”

Then she added a few more words.

…!?

I suppose if you look at it like that…

“Oh, your soul just leapt again. Just what is stimulating your desire?”

This isn’t good. She’ll find out at this rate.

I had to take action before that happened. What did I need? Something to write with, Tselika’s trust, and one other thing. It didn’t help that our knowledge of Eastern Youkai was not much help with Western demons. Not even the Succubus knew how to defeat Tselika who was clearly at a higher level.

But there was one plan that would weaken Archdemon Tselika.

I could not imagine how far her deadly sin had spread. It was even possible the Youkai hiding in the thatch roof house’s ice room were fighting. If so, what would happen to my unconscious family? If I didn’t try to take advantage of this one-shot opportunity, it was possible I would never get my small world back.

Mai had said we did not have time.

I agreed, so I would do whatever I could to deal with this quickly.

“Shinobu, how about you tell me now? What is this hope of defeating me that you have found?”

And so, I gave an intentionally provocative response.

“*Try to think for yourself.*”

“*You do not get a second chance. I thought I already told you that.*”

That awful sweetness assaulted me again and my brain felt like it was being kneaded like clay.

Part 5

My vision…no, all five of my sense had gone red.

My inner ear didn’t seem to be working, so I had no sense of front, back, left, right, up, or down.

Supposedly, if someone was blindfolded, given ear plugs, placed on a soft bed, had their arms and legs covered in metal tubes, and otherwise had all stimulation dropped to a minimum, their sense of self would not last long. This red world was precisely that. Nothing even had to happen. Simply by being there, I felt like I would suffer Gestaltzerfall.

——Hey, Shinobu.

A voice came from an unknown direction. My senses had been thoroughly worn down, so it permeated my body like a drop of water found after wandering through the desert.

——Answer me truthfully and surrender to me, and I will reward you. I will provide you with whatever reward you wish. Now, how about it?

“Reward me?”

I didn’t want anything like that. But if I did not cling to those words, the stimulation would vanish and I would be unable to maintain my sanity. The words escaped my lips as a purely defensive reaction.

——Yes. If you only build up a resistance, I will let you do with my body as you wish. My superiority will of course be maintained, but I will still give you access to my body whenever you want. A thrilling proposal, is it not?

The very premise of the idea is insane. You’re worse than a drug. You aren’t something I can endure with enough effort or practice. I can’t do it on a fundamental biological level.

——Hm. Then how about I use my power to let you seduce other girls? Surely there are some members of the opposite sex who are out of reach to you no matter how close they might seem.

The scenery grew distorted.

The red coloration was swept away and I was at school for some reason.

I stood alone in the empty classroom and someone called out to me from behind.

“Sorry I’m so late when I was the one that called you here. But I’m glad you waited.”

“…Madoka?”

My problem classmate pressed her index fingers together in front of her chest, blushed, and fidgeted.

“Um, uh, you probably had a pretty good guess what this was about when I sent that email calling you here, but this kind of thing is best said face to face, right? Ahh! I’m just too nervous!! But wait! I can’t give up before I’ve even begun! I haven’t even gotten serious yet!!”

By this point, I could tell what this scene was.

And if I surrendered to Tselika and borrowed her power, it could become reality.

However…

“Madoka, what’s that?”

“Eh? What’s what?”

“That around your neck.”

“What? Don’t tell me there’s something there? And during one of the most important scenes of my life too. Ah ha ha. It would happen now, wouldn’t it?”

She hadn’t noticed the thick and villainous collar around her neck. A chain was attached to it and that chain stretched out so far into the distance that I could not tell who was holding the other end.

But Madoka could not see it and happiness filled her face.

Was this the true form of the glory I would gain with Tselika’s power?

Yes.

Was a dream given to you by another (and thus could be taken away by that person at any time) really this cruel a thing?

“I can’t…”

“?”

“I can’t do this!! How can I accept anything in such a twisted way!?”

——Why can’t you? I’m giving you exactly what you want.

The stage changed. I moved from the classroom to the schoolyard. Nagisa stood before me and she too wore a thick collar with a never-ending chain attached to it.

Akechi was supposedly her current boyfriend, but he too had a collar and chain.

He had a beaming smile on his face, he grabbed Nagisa’s shoulders from behind, and he pushed her toward me.

“Nagisa was saying she likes you more. And I think she’s right. So we broke up. You can have her, so be happy together, okay?”

What is this?

“Eh heh heh. Yeah, it seems you’re #1 to me, Shinobu-chan. I’ve dated a lot of different people, but now that I think about it, I think I was always chasing after your shadow.”

Was this what I wanted?

Did I want a girl I had broken up with long ago to be returned to me like a forgotten textbook?

——Can you honestly say you have no regrets at all? Part of you wants to get back together with her, right? With my power, that is entirely possible. And her violent side can of course be contained.

The stage changed again.

I was now at my thatch roof home.

“Stop…”

Pain shot through my head. I was rejecting this one before it even began.

The front door opened and my feet moved against my will. I stepped inside and walked down the long hallway that had several chains running down it.

I didn’t want to see this.

It was possible this desire did exist inside me. It was possible I had felt this in some deep part of my heart. But I had known her almost from the moment I was born. If “she” began flirting with me like a scene from silly porn video, something inside me would break. I could tell before it had even begun.

The door opened.

A large room appeared before my eyes.

A warm, gentle, and convenient hell awaited me. They all turned their heads my way: the Furutsubaki, the Yuki Onna, and the Zashiki Warashi. They all had collars around their necks. Their own thoughts had been completely erased and they looked like they had been injected with pure happiness. They all opened their mouths at once and-

“Stop!!!!!”

Shouting was enough to make me feel dizzy.

I could tell just how much that simple exchange had taken from me.

——Oh? Do you feel guilty when it’s someone you know? Then how about a celebrity far removed from your own life? Yes, why not take all seventy-eight members of Tarot Girls 22 for yourself? Hah hah! Surely you’ve imagined something like that before.

The next thing I knew, the stage had changed and tears were spilling from my eyes.

My senses were gradually numbing over and my words of rejection were growing weaker.

My mouth was horribly dry.

The sense of disgust was gradually fading. The human ability to grow accustomed to anything was kicking in.

——And there is no need to limit yourself to girls. There are as many types of desire as there are people. Would you like to achieve success as a businessman? Would you like to win a gold medal in the Olympics? Would you like to make a discovery great enough to be a household name worldwide? How about being the world’s strongest? Or becoming a singer whose songs drive the world into a frenzy?

Having a dream come true without using my own strength was to reject that dream.

That would take away the joy of achieving it.

Countless people wanted to climb Mt. Everest and not all of them would reach the peak, but building an elevator to the top would only ruin those dreams.

Having one’s dream come true did not necessarily lead to happiness.

Tselika would grant it instantly. Being given the power to make any dream come true would make all dreams equally meaningless. Dreams were meant to be something to aspire to, but this would make them just as boring as anything else.

It was like having a walkthrough thrown at you in the middle of playing an RPG that takes 100 hours to complete.

Even if you ignored the book for a while, you would eventually get stuck somewhere. You would run into a problem. And once you opened that book, it was all over. Next time, it would take less to open that book. Then it would happen again and again and again and again. You would eventually consider it perfectly normal to be flipping through the pages and ultimately play the game with the book open in your lap. That game was meant to be thoroughly enjoyed for 100 hours, but you would simply be working through it while getting nothing out of it. There was no shine to a reward you knew was coming and did not have to work to obtain.

My interest faded.

As each temptation was shown to me, I could feel the gears of my heart coming to a stop.

These were sweet, delightful, and convenient dreams, but they still bared their ferocious fangs.

And those fangs pierced my heart.

——Do you want a comfortable family life? Do you want a thrilling life? Do you want to be someone who knows all the secrets and mysteries no one else does? Do you want to be someone everyone praises? Do you want to be a dictator who can get away with anything? I can make any or all of them come true as long as you announce your surrender to me.

…

I didn’t care anymore.

Resisting or not would change nothing.

No one could defeat Tselika.

If I didn’t oppose her, she would at least not harm my small world.

So…

——Oh, I know. How about I create a world of true sufficiency? With my power, I can overwrite this puny human world with a new set of values to create a golden planet where everything is fulfilled.

By that point, I had even lost interest in that instant temptation.

Some small thread seemed to snap inside me.

I didn’t want to see any more of this, so…

“Hishigami Mai is hiding. She’s trying to defeat you.”

I spat out the words as if raising my hands in surrender.

My voice was so void of warmth that it made me sick to hear it.

Part 6

The original rural scenery returned and I was collapsed on the ground. I could not move my arms and legs properly.

Thanks to my betrayal, Tselika’s arm was lifting Hishigami Mai by the throat.

“Ah…khah…ghhh!!!???”

“I do have uses for female bodies, but…hm. You have an artificial smell to you. I was thinking I could use you as a spare for when Marguerite’s body is destroyed, but that would not work.”

After a dull sound like a swinging bat, Hishigami Mai was thrown casually to the side. She continued flying away from us while bouncing several times like a flat stone skipping on a river.

Only after throwing her did Tselika click her tongue as if remembering something.

“Tch. It might have been fun to remove her soul and make her a ‘roommate’ for lonely Marguerite. But it would be too much effort to go get her now. My type of violence is automatically regulated to guarantee I strike fear in the target, but that does have its downsides on occasion.”

Even that Hishigami woman had been dealt with so easily.

Tselika had not seen her as a threat or been particularly interested in her.

It was hopeless after all. Tselika was not a specialist in sneak attacks. It wasn’t that this was the only thing she could do. Her plentiful deck contained temptation, corruption, supremacy, hostility, fear, and violence. If she chose the violence card on a whim, I would have been turned to mincemeat in an instant.

“More importantly, I am pleased with your admirable decision, Shinobu. I will reward you as promised. What would you like?”

“…”

I remained sitting on the ground as I spoke coldly.

“…I would like to hear Marguerite’s screams again.”

“Ha ha!! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!! Your tastes are rapidly improving, Shinobu! I can tell from your soul’s wavelength that this is no act. You truly want to see Marguerite again. After all those emulated desires, do you need something like that to actually feel something again?”

She laughed and snapped her fingers.

A portion of the scenery distorted, ripped apart, and revealed pitch-black darkness. Inside that seemingly endless expanse, I heard an unsettling “sound” that reminded me of a weak whistling or wind passing through a gap between stones.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhh
hhhhhhhhhhhhhaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhahhhh…”

It did not sound like something that could come from a human throat.

It sounded like a plea asking for help and a curse asking to be killed.

“…”

I unsteadily stood up and walked toward that dark hole to better hear that voice.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh
hhhhhhhhhhhhhaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhahhhh…”

I reached the fissure and placed my hand on it as if to peer inside, but it was too dark to see anything.

“Heh heh. Are you interested in my captive? There is a unique way to torment a soul that lacks a physical vessel, but I will teach you all about that in due time.”

A voice of deep resentment echoed up from the depths of hell.

As I listened to it, I spoke under my breath.

“…ng. …w……ed…, …f… ……….ri…, …b……., ……s…… …h……., …..gh… …s… …… e……”

“What? Wait, was that-…!?”

As if some gears had ground to a halt, Tselika stopped moving. Even her serpentine eyes stopped.

“I’ll admit you’re the strongest one here and no one can hope to stand up to you. But at the same time, you needed to use Marguerite’s body to gain freedom. In that case, I only have to use the same method that Australian witch did. I can use the method to summon a demon in order to summon Marguerite’s soul and place it back inside your body. And like a game of musical chairs, you’ll be forced out of that body!!”

“But where would you gain that secret technique!?”

“Yeah, that isn’t something a mere high school boy would know. And even Hyakki Yakou doesn’t know that much about Western magic. The Succubus might be from the West, but if she could use magic herself, she wouldn’t have been chased into my attic by Hyakki Yakou.”

The Succubus supported my unsteady body as I smiled and continued my explanation.

“But there’s someone else here, isn’t there? There’s an Australian witch who carelessly summoned an archdemon who didn’t quite qualify as one of the seven deadly sins!!”

“You don’t mean…”

Tselika focused on that quiet whistling sound.

It did not sound like a voice, but it clearly spoke.

“…necessary components change depending on the date, time, and direction, so the exact calculations were performed outside. And instead of directing the incantation outwards, I focused on this inner world as a plea to my own soul. Making an on-the-fly shift from a tattva image to an astral projection is exceedingly difficult, so I made sure…”

“I dropped a single note inside,” I told the dumbfounded archdemon. “I told her I would pull her soul out of there if she helped me. This was her one and only chance, so I knew she would jump at the opportunity whether she was my on my side or not. To put it another way, the key to it all was to have you open the door to her cell once more. Since my soul’s wavelength or whatever gives away if I’m hiding something, it was a race against time until you found out!”

That was why Hishigami Mai had said we had no time.

And she had intentionally acted as a decoy to help me contact Marguerite as soon as possible.

Yes.

She was the one that had suggested I give up at some point, sell her out, and use that to gain Tselika’s disgraceful trust.

That had gotten her to open the door and I had then dropped the note inside.

With the help of that specialist, I was standing before Tselika with that stopgap knowledge of the Western methods.

“For the aforementioned reasons, the veil of ignorance may become the key to the door of the unknown. I name the soul of Marguerite Steinhols as a new demon and command her to pass through the door in that vessel of flesh!”

“Ohh…”

“Return, Marguerite Steinhols!! Cast aside your old self and take hold of your new self. Like a snake shedding its skin, cast aside the name of Tselika Wien Alpha Chelydia Lumidrier and fill yourself with a bright new soul!!”

“Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!???”

The gray scale-like things covering Tselika’s…no, Marguerite’s body all burst off. The obvious symbols of the horns, tail, and wings turned to pure white ashes and dissolved into the air. The serpentine eyes returned to human ones.

Marguerite fell to her knees and then collapsed completely to the ground.

“You eyeball woman!! …Oh, what was I doing?”

“You tongue man!! …Huh? Why am I biting the Umbrella?”

The fight between the Umbrella and Lantern had ended at some point.

I wondered what had happened to Hyakki Yakou.

However, I did not have time to see if Marguerite was breathing or to place a coat over her as she lay before me.

“Do you really think you’ve changed the rails of destiny with that?”

A voice reached me from directly behind.

I turned around to find a blue female oni with a knife-like horn growing from her forehead.

The Aoandon had just mercilessly thrust her hand out with the speed of a bullet.

Time seemed to stop for me.

Instead of a human like me, the Aoandon was targeting the Succubus’s chest as she floated alongside me. She seemed to be trying to kill the stronger opponent first.

Hishigami Mai was too far away, I still couldn’t rely on Hyakki Yakou, and the Umbrella and Lantern could not fight in the first place.

I was the only one that could move.

I knew I had no time to think, but I did take a brief moment to do so.

If either the Succubus or I could survive, which one had a better chance of victory afterwards?

Whose survival gave a better chance of rescuing Madoka, Nagisa, my family, the Zashiki Warashi, the Yuki Onna, and the others in the village? Now that Archdemon Tselika was gone, who would be able to stop this conflict?

With the answer in mind, I gathered my resolve and knocked the Succubus out of the way.

And of course, taking her place meant taking the Aoandon’s stabbing hand myself.

A dull sound burst out.

A burning sensation passed from the center of my chest to my back.

Thank you, Tselika. You were a truly awful person, but I do thank you for one thing. I had some of your intoxication left inside me and that numbed my fear. Without that, my legs would have frozen and I could only have watched the worst case scenario play out.

The Succubus watched it happen with her eyes opened wider than I had ever seen them.

Ha ha. I didn't know you could look like that.

You look like a small girl who just had her teddy bear taken from her.

However, I had made the right decision.

If the Succubus had been killed with that first strike, I would have been helpless to do anything. After all, Youkai can't be harmed by normal blades and bullets.

But demons and Youkai were different. At the very least, another paranormal being could stand on the same stage and fight.

So…

I'll restrain the Aoandon's right arm. I'll give her a handicap. So can you not ask anything more of me? And can you risk your life for my selfish desire here, Succubus?

Protect them.

Protect Madoka, Nagisa, dad, mom, the Yuki Onna, the Zashiki Warashi, and everyone else around me.

I didn't know if my consciousness would last another ten, thirty, or sixty seconds, but it didn't matter. I moved my mouth that could only taste iron now and I used all my remaining strength to force out a yell.

"Succubuuu

Part 7

Not even I knew how it had ended.

After the Aoandon swung her arm horizontally and I slipped off of it, I rolled ungracefully along the paddy field, ended up on my back, and could not move properly. My eyelids finally numbed over and I couldn't gather my thoughts. I could only vaguely wonder if it was truly over.

Someone stepped on the ground.

It was Hafuri who had one arm hanging limply at her side, the right half of her mourning clothes dyed red, and her family emblem torn.

"What happened…to the Aoandon…?"

Asking that question was all I could manage. I may have released more blood than words.

"Did the…Succubus…and Hyakki…Yakou…end…everything?"

But Hafuri did not answer.

She simply shook her head.

My throat was trembling and I no longer had the strength to speak as she looked down at me and spoke.

"We must rely on the power of the Hyakki Yakou Prototype Ver. 39 Zashiki Warashi. There is no other way to escape this destructive conclusion."

What was that?

Zashiki Warashi?

I did not know what she was talking about, but I did not like the sound of the Zashiki Warashi part. My chest had a hole through it, but it filled with concern when it sounded like that Indoor Youkai would be dragged into all this.

"Her power seems to have been broken ten years ago. It was used then to save you from a Youkai known as the Aburatori."

Hafuri reached the core of the issue.

She spoke of something not even I knew about.

"So you must travel to the past. However, Hyakki Yakou's time travel technology is no more than a prototype. …You are the most closely related to the truth of the Ver. 39. What truly happened back then? What was the true form of that incident before the Aburatori and Ver. 39 changed it? You must find that and help reach a resolution that does not use the Ver. 39's power. If you do…"

Then this strange power of the Ver. 39 would not be used in the past.

Then we could use it here to escape this hopeless situation.

So…

“The Ver. 39 is incredibly powerful. When its full power is utilized, it is said a destiny entirely separate from the current one can be created and embedded. If we use that, we can turn this around no matter how perfect a checkmate the Aoandon’s group achieves,” explained Hafuri. “But a change to the past will not necessarily be a change for the better. Saying this may be meaningless as I am only asking for your help because we have no other choice, but keep this one thing in mind. …This incident will most likely be unimaginably difficult to solve. This past incident was enough to decide rewriting destiny was the only solution. If you fail to find another solution, your current existence could be caught in the alteration to history and erased. …After all, a failure on your part would lead to your younger self being killed at the hands of the deadly Youkai known as the Aburatori.”

But I had no other choice.

If I did nothing, the Aoandon’s group would destroy this small world of mine.

“But please do this. Please help us protect the world.”

I did not need to be asked twice.

I would once more face the incident that had defined who I was today.

In the Gap Between Timelines 1

I had no idea if the concepts of time and space applied there.

My vision and every other sense were blotted out with the color black and I could not even confirm the presence of my own body, but I could still feel myself rapidly accelerating.

A few pieces of information reached me as if they had been forcibly shoved into my brain.

Hyakki Yakou’s time travel Package uses a Youkai known as a Kudan.

(The Kudan is a Youkai that can predict what will occur in the near future with 100% accuracy, but there are no records of what point in in time is defined as the present. That was used to redefine the Kudan’s present to a set date and thus travel to any point in time.)

When traveling to the past, the traveler will not be perceived by the people in the past.

(It will feel something like an out-of-body experience. While time traveling, one can pass through doors and walls and is not subject to physiological needs such as eating and sleeping. However, such things can be enjoyed as a form of entertainment or just for fun.)

When traveling to the past, the traveler normally cannot touch any objects from the past.

(Much like in an out-of-body experience, physical interference is difficult.)

But they can interfere just once. In other words, they can touch something.

(As can be seen in this and the previous condition, it is an extremely exceptional action and carries a great risk.)

If, after interfering, a distortion to history as a whole is detected, the traveler will be returned to their original time.

(To put it another way, history can only be changed once and the traveler cannot return unless they change something. The smallest thing can cause history to change in unexpected ways, so the traveler must be incredibly careful.)

Only the traveler's safety is protected during the time travel process.

(If the traveler takes an object or individual other than themselves with them, the amount of time traveled will affect that object or individual. For example, when traveling one hundred years in time, Extra Individual A will instantly experience the passage of one hundred years.)

Hyakki Yakou must have placed the information in my head in advance.

I didn't know the detailed theory behind it all, so I focused my mind on the destination of my acceleration.

What had truly happened ten years ago with the Youkai known as the Aburatori? How was my young self involved?

And could I really solve it all without using the power that the Zashiki Warashi apparently had?

I couldn't imagine how I would that, but we were all doomed if I couldn't do it.

We needed the Zashiki Warahi's power to avoid that hopeless conclusion.

The Aoandon had begun the destruction of Japan and I had no idea who was in control of it anymore, but it would be completed regardless.

As soon as I focus my mind, the acceleration seemed to double.

My soul was dragged toward a certain time and a certain place.

Chapter 6: Jinnai Shinobu@Aburatori – Truth

Part 1

The first thing I heard was the chirping of a sparrow.

Next came the light. Color quickly filled my white vision. It gained depth, the scenery was constructed, and I found myself standing in front of a thatch-roof house.

…Is this my home?

It looked like it, but a few details were different. The branches of the trees in the yard seemed off and the tree mode Furutsubaki (small) was nowhere to be seen.

In that case, that Hafuri girl must have been telling the truth.

Is this really ten years ago?

“Nagisa, Nagisa! Ah ha ha. Again! Let’s do it again!”

“Ehh? But I’m tired, Shinobu-chaaan…”

I heard voices from inside the house.

A young girl called to a “Shinobu”. I needed to learn what kind of connection the Aburatori and I had in the past, so sticking with my past self seemed like the best bet. I may have been sent to the past, but I only had one viewpoint and I couldn’t rewind. If I carelessly missed some crucial information, this trip into the past would be meaningless.

I started to reach for the front door, but…

“I can only interfere once, huh?”

This was apparently similar to an out-of-body experience, so I could pass through walls and doors.

I tilted my head and hesitantly reached out my fingertips. They passed right through the closed door. I didn’t really feel much of anything. It was so strange that I pulled my fingers out and stuck them back in a few times before slipping my entire body through.

As soon as I began to question the fact that I was standing on the ground well enough, I sank down to my knees.

Oh, no! Do I pass through things the instant I think about it!? Could I accidentally send myself straight to the center of the earth!?

I focused on the floor and ground again and took another step. This time, nothing unusual happened. I was apparently floating instead of walking. I had to view it that

way for my own safety. I did my very best not to think too hard about things like the rotation and revolution of the earth. If those questions had filled my head, who knows how far I would have been flung.

More importantly, I had to check on the young Shinobu that was my past self.

I walked down the unchanged hallway and heard high-pitched voices coming from the Japanese-style living room.

“Nagisaaa!!”

“Shinobu-chaaan!!”

A boy and girl of about five or six raised their hands, ran in from the left and right, and slammed into each at the center. They both shouted the same thing as they did.

“Fusion!!”

???

“Ah ha ha ha ha! Nagisa, again, again!”

“Ehh!? You said that was the last time!”

I froze up in utter confusion for a moment, but then I realized that was a gag from some comedian or another. Maybe. After ten years, it was hard to remember what I had found funny about that, but that was the way of things with comedy and fashion.

But more importantly…

…*There really is a small me from the past here.*

Shinobu was laughing in utter glee in a happi coat, but Nagisa looked pretty exhausted in her mother’s homemade Red Riding Hood outfit.

If this was something from an old photo album or home video that the whole family was watching, I probably would have been writhing in embarrassment, but this was somehow different. I felt separated from it by some thin barrier and it didn’t feel like that was me.

“Ahh, now I’m thirsty. Nagisa, let’s go get something to drink.”

“W-wait, Shinobu-chaaan.”

Shinobu ran toward me, passed right through my body(?), and ran off down the hallway. The small Nagisa also passed through me as she chased after him.

“C-c-c-cat panties! Cat panties!”

“Y-you can’t, Shinobu-chan. My mom said not to sing the cat panties song.”

“Ehh? It isn’t gonna curse me, so what does it matter?”

“That isn’t the issue.”

“Quit complaining, Nagisa. You were just as bad with that mango song.”

“(Rumble rumble rumble) Shinobu-chan, you swore to forever seal away the mango and banana song. (Rumble rumble rumble)”

“Pii!? O-okay! I won’t sing it anymore!”

He was supposedly my past self, but I couldn’t seem to predict what he would do. I chased after him and found him using both hands to pry open the refrigerator door.

“Ah! Shinobu-chan, the fizzy stuff is bad for you.”

“But it tastes the best.”

It seemed today’s topic was a bottle of cider. In fact, Shinobu ignored Nagisa’s warning and started pouring some into a glass.

“What do you want, Nagisa?”

“I-I can’t rummage through someone else’s refrigerator.”

“You can drink something too! You have my permission!”

“Uuh… Then instead of that fizzy stuff, I’ll have orange juice. My mom said the ‘hundred percent’ is good for you.”

It was weird seeing a happy time when Nagisa could say normal things instead of only ever saying “I love you” or “I’ll kill you” while categorizing all of mankind with the labels “enemy”, “ally”, “not interested”, or “extreme love”. I felt like I should apologize to her once I returned to the present. Then again, if I brought up that stuff from middle school, there was a good possibility she would stab me right then and there.

“A drink isn’t enough. Oh, I know. I think we have some kitty bread.”

“Uuh… I feel bad eating kitty bread.”

“Hm? Don’t worry, Nagisa. It’s easy to eat if you do this.”

“Ahhh! Don’t tear the kitty’s face apart!!”

I noticed a schedule attached to the fridge door by a magnet. It included the date a package from an online store was supposed to arrive.

According to that, it was late March ten years before.

“Ah, Nee-chan! You want some of the fizzy stuff too?”

“Wahyah! A-a Youkai… (Tremble, tremble)”

“?”

Nee…-chan?

There was a time when I had called my uncle “Nii-chan”, but who was this “Nee-chan”? Puzzled by that nickname, I looked in the same direction as the young Shinobu.

There, I saw someone walking into the kitchen.

A Zashiki Warashi…in a red yukata???

“Shinobu, you can drink that carbonated stuff, but only one cup, okay? Lunch is in about an hour.”

“Ehh? But I want to drink more. Bartender, give me another!”

“Y-you can’t, Shinobu-chan. You have to do what the Youkai says…”

The Zashiki Warashi snatched the two liter bottle from the complaining boy’s hands and screwed on the cap.

“You can have more at lunchtime, Shinobu.”

“Okay. I’ll have to remember that.”

…Hmm. It feels weird to see her acting like a big sister. Did all of this really happen?

That said, she really was a Youkai. This was ten years in the past and she looked exactly the same as the present. Comparing that to Shinobu and Nagisa made it painfully obvious she was a paranormal being. It felt wrong, like someone had cut out her picture and pasted it into an older one.

Also, seeing that Good-for-Nothing Youkai caused some curiosity to rear its ugly head inside me. I could view anything in this past world. No one could see me, so I didn’t have to worry about an unexpected counterattack.

Does this mean I can peep all I want when that sexy Zashiki Warashi is in the bath or changing? Heh. Eh heh heh.

“…”

“What is it, Nee-chan?”

As Shinobu tilted his head, the Zashiki Warashi gave me a truly unnatural look, so I grew as cautious as possible and slowly moved to the side.

But the Zashiki Warashi’s head and gaze remained perfectly locked onto me.

“Am I just imaging it?” she said.

“???”

This was bad. It was very, very bad. It looked like I couldn’t get too carried away. Human rules didn’t seem to apply to Youkai here. Who could say when I would accidentally change history?

Meanwhile, I heard the TV from the Western-style living room connected to the kitchen.

“Just how effective is the Hidarugami Diet!? This new diet is spreading by word of mouth over the internet, but specialists have begun to speak out about the risks.”

Someone had apparently turned on the TV. Shinobu and the others walked into the living room, so I followed suit.

“It’s grampa! What is that you have there? A letter?”

“Oh, Shinobu-chan’s grandfather. H-hello.”

My grandfather waved while chopping up a letter with scissors. After it was nothing but scraps, he threw it into the garbage can.

“Ah, you threw it away without reading it!”

“This letter didn’t deserve to be read.”

“Nii-chan said email is better than letters. You’ve moved onto email, haven’t you!?”

“No, I’m not so good with those electronics. Staring at those screens makes my eyes water.”

Some small footsteps approached.

Instead of family, it was some travelling Youkai staying at the house. The one that looked like a small child was an Onbu-Obake and the large man with a red face was… what was it? It didn’t have any horns, so it didn’t seem to be an Oni.

“Shinobu-chan! I heard we could get a Youkai Stamp if we came here. Give me a stamp! Or a piggyback ride!”

“Eh heh heh. I happened to hear that a Youkai Stamp is an important symbol.”

Youkai Stamp???

I tilted my head, but the young Shinobu seemed to understand. He pulled out a round stamp about five centimeters across and pressed it to the back of the Youkai’s hands.

“Now you’re my friend.”

“Wonderful! Now give me a piggyback ride!!”

“You’re a Friend Youkai too.”

“Eh heh heh. So this is the Youkai Stamp that began as an app and now even has a movie…”

This was apparently a magazine bonus based on a kid’s TV show. Unlike most Youkai shows, no one died and the Youkai weren’t defeated. They were simply captured as Friend Youkai. I didn’t really remember the details, though.

“Mhh. Why are you wearing a happi coat, Shinobu-chan? Is there a festival coming up?”

“This proves I’m a man of the Jinnai Brewery!”

He spun around to show it off.

Oh, so that’s why he’s wearing that.

“What does an Onbu-Obake do?”

“Ask people for piggyback rides! Obariyon!!”

“And a Kaki Otoko?”

“Eh heh heh. You can just think of me as a kind of Tantankororin. You’re still too young for the details. …Oh, it’s Hayabusa!!”

“Hayabusaaa! Give me a piggyback ride!!”

The Youkai left with some loud footsteps. I heard someone shouting “Waah! Stay away from me, you perverts!” in the hallway, but what exactly was happening out there?

Back in the living room young Nagisa was puffing out her cheeks.

“Mhh.”

“What is it, Nagisa?”

“Shinobu-chan! Give me a stamp too!”

“What are you talking about? This is a Youkai Stamp, so I can’t stamp a human like you.”

“Mhhhhh!”

She was really mad, but then her giant St. Bernard trotted into the living room and gave a single loud bark.

She pulled a children’s cellphone from the small barrel hanging below the large dog’s neck.

“Oh, it’s already this late. It’s almost lunchtime, so I have to head home.”

“Okay. I’ll walk you home. Nii-chan said a true man walks the girl home!”

“Zashiki Warashi, what do you think about that?” asked my grandfather.

“If he didn’t try to act cool saying lame things like that, he wouldn’t have a Kaki Otoko attacking him.”

With that, Shinobu, Nagisa, and the St. Bernard made their way to the front entrance.

It nearly forgot, but the Aburatori incident was supposedly going to begin soon. I had no idea when it would it would happen or how, so I had no choice but to follow them.

The rural farm road was the same scenery I was used to seeing. That said, there seemed to be more Youkai than I was used to.

Shinobu and Nagisa approached an intersection in the middle of the paddy fields.

“I am a Nurikabe.”

“Wahyah!? Sh-Sh-Shinobu-chaaan!”

“Don’t worry, Nagisa. He doesn’t bite.”

A giant three-eyed dog lay in the middle of the narrow road. It was about the size of a microbus, so it completely blocked the way.

“Wait a little until that work van goes by.”

“A-are you sure it isn’t a bad Youkai…?”

“I’m gonna give him a Youkai Stamp.”

“When I get home, I’m getting a potato and making you a Human Stamp…”

Before long, a vehicle drove through the intersection and the giant three-eyed dog vanished into thin air. The Youkai seemed to be like a railroad crossing barrier.

Nagisa’s home was not in the middle of the paddy fields. It was at the base of the mountain on the edge of the village. I could hear cows and chickens from nearby. I was pretty sure they ran an extremely small-scale but high-quality micro-farm. I remembered hearing something about a price tag of ten thousand yen on each egg laid by their stress-free chickens.

And at this point in the past, no one knew that accidentally seeing her parents at work in the meat processing facility would knock one of Nagisa’s screws loose and ultimately help develop the gory techniques of one of the world’s three greatest yandere. (sob)

“Bye, Shinobu-chan. I’ll head back to play after lunch.”

“Yeah! It’s a promise!”

“Go right back home. Don’t take any detours, okay?”

“Okay! Leave it to me!”

“…I-I’m worried. Maybe I should go with you.”

That would have begun an infinite loop, so Nagisa said goodbye for the time being. Shinobu then started home alone.

However…

“What is it, Kappa!? Why are you all dried up on the road!?”

“U-uuh… The plate on my head has dried up. Water… Could you give me some water?”

“I only have the fizzy stuff in my water bottle.”

“Th-that’s bubbly!? Obh…ofahhh! What is this new sensation!?”

The Kappa got a stamp.

“Fwa ha ha! I am the great Tsuchigumo!! Heh heh. Don’t expect me to obey you!!”

“Huh? Why are you dressed like a girl when you’re a spider?”

“I am the ultimate delinquent, so I can transform into a beautiful woman!”

“How do spiders sleep? In a hammock? Make one for me!!”

“St-stop! You won’t get any silk by pulling on me there!!”

The Tsuchigumo got a stamp.

“Keh heh heh. I am a Nopperabou! What do you think? Scary, aren’t I!?”

“You aren’t supposed to call people scary for how they look.”

“Eh? Ah!? That may be true, but that’s kind of the entire reason I exist!”

“Anyway, you’re my friend too.”

The Nopperabou got a stamp.

D-does this kid forget what he’s doing every three steps!?

Every time he came across a Youkai, he would get sidetracked and he was now walking in an entirely different direction from the thatch-roof house.

“Ah! Come to think of it, I forget to give him a stamp! I need to go give him one!”

“You’re kidding, right?” I said. “The kid’s heading into the mountain, now!?”

He was me, but it was still scary watching it. Then again, I could only physically interfere once, so I couldn’t waste that chance here.

I followed Shinobu along the mountain path and he came to a clearing only about thirty or forty meters up. Instead of a high-tech orchard, the flat area only had some random undergrowth, so it may have been cleared out for a small shrine.

And…

“Hey! I’m here to play! I’ll give you a Youkai Stamp too!!”

I heard the wind gently blowing through the tree branches overhead.

A single rundown cabin existed on that elevated clearing.

And then something peeked out from behind it, as if revealing itself from its hiding spot.

All of its face save the mouth was hidden behind a large conical hat with a single eye drawn on it.

It wore a farmer’s kimono with leggings covering the feet.

Its arms and legs were so wrinkled they looked like tree branches or part of a mummy.

To sum it up…this was the Aburatori.

That worst of all deadly Youkai was second to none when it came to killing children.

“…!!!???”

Why was he here?

Hadn’t he suddenly wandered into Noukotsu Village one day, caused a number of incidents, and got young Shinobu caught in the middle?

The Aburatori slowly walked over.

The large hat still hid his face and expression as he silently approached Shinobu.

He simply appeared, simply abducted, and simply killed. He would take children away, remove their organs, stab them with skewers, and cook them over a fire. The Youkai that took children’s oil like that was known as the Aburatori. However, it was not defined what he did with that oil and there was no moral behind the story. He was a simple fear without any related lesson such as “return home before it gets dark” or “do what your parents tell you”.

He moved ever closer.

He approached.

From three meters, to two, and then one.

“What do I do?”

I was filled with a sticky sense of revulsion that went beyond simple fear. Was this it? Was this the scene where I was supposed to use my one forceful interference? I had no time to hesitate. If I failed here, the Zashiki Warashi would use her Ver. 39 power (whatever that was). To preserve that power and use it for the Aoandon incident in the present, I could not afford to mess up here. I had to use my one chance as accurately as possible.

“What do I do!?”

But as soon as I thought that…

“I told you not to come here, didn’t I?”

He clearly spoke with his face still hidden behind the large hat.

The voice was not at all like the rampaging monster I knew that simply devoured children’s organs.

“I am an incredibly scary Youkai that will eventually harm you.”

It was a male voice with deep intelligence behind it.

It was practically dripping with feelings of anguish and conflict.

“That isn’t true.”

And…

“Don’t worry! I can get along with any Youkai, no matter how deadly! I’m here to give you a stamp and you were worried for me. That means we’re already friends. So neither of us has to worry!!”

“…”

“Hold out your hand, Aburatori.”

“Why?”

“Just do it! I’ll give you a Youkai Stamp!”

Shinobu forcibly took the confused Aburatori’s hand and pressed the toy-like stamp against the back of his hand.

“Now you’re a Friend Youkai.”

Shinobu gave a beaming smile.

And then my past self clearly said the following in Noukotsu Village ten years ago:

“So don’t say those sad things anymore. We’re the best of friends now!!”

Part 2

Huh? I thought.

What did I just see?

Is this really what happened in the actual version of the past?

Part 3

Nothing else happened and Shinobu played with Nagisa at the thatch-roof house without interacting any more with the Aburatori. A variety of Youkai made their way into the house without permission, but I couldn’t see anything else that looked related to the past incident.

“I know what you mean! Jello is cool because it’s see-through!”

“No, Shinobu-chan. Jello is cute because it jiggles.”

The two children argued over their snack, but once they ran out of things to talk about there, they moved onto the names written on their bags.

“Look, Nagisa. I can write my name in kanji.”

“I-I can do that too. We’re starting school this spring, so hiragana would be embarrassing.”

“It’s a heart under a blade! Stab!! But Nee-chan’s is hard. It’s got a whole bunch of diagonal lines. How’d you get such an annoying name?”

“Shinobu, that was the name your parents had prepared in case you were born a girl. They didn’t need it anymore, so I borrowed it.”

Evening fell, Nagisa left, and Shinobu started getting a little excited.

“Nee-chan, Nee-chan!!”

“What is it, Shinobu?”

“I can’t get my toy box closed. All the toys fit in there before, so why won’t they now? This must be some kind of evil magic! There’s nothing I can do!”

“Shinobu. Let’s try thinking through this together, one step at a time.”

They began putting rubber balls, toy cars, and other toys inside the limited space of the toy box like a simple puzzle game.

She was still pretty helpful at this point. How’d she get so lazy by the present?

Once the work was done, it was apparently time for dinner.

When his plate was set in front of him, Shinobu gave a lopsided frown and spoke to his mother.

“Adults don’t play fair.”

“Eh!? Wh-where did that come from?”

“Everyone but me gets to eat oysters. And you all act like it’s the best part.”

“Oh… But they say it’s dangerous to feed raw oysters to small children.”

“Adults always say that! I get that I can’t drink the gold fizzy stuff, but why can’t I have coffee or tea either? You put it all off limits, calling it an ‘adult flavor’!”

“You can’t have any, Shinobu. Caffeine is the last thing you need.”

“Mhhh… Nee-chaaan!!”

Shinobu swung his arms and legs around to summon the Zashiki Warashi who sighed when she heard what was going on.

“Yes, the adults don’t play fair at all. Now, how about you come with me and eat some fried oysters?”

“Ah, no fair! You’re just going to steal Shinobu from me without even waiting for an explanation!?”

“But I want one of those slippery ones. Slippery!!”

Shinobu kept complaining, but he seemed happy enough once his stomach was full. He lay on the floor patting his stomach and spoke up.

“Today, I’ll take a bath with mom.”

“Oh, my. Well, I don’t mind.”

“And with dad.”

“Veh!?”

“What was that for? Do you not want to take a bath with dad?”

“W-well, I don’t have a problem taking a bath with my husband, but I’m not sure I want you in there with us. I would have to find a way to banish all of my worldly thoughts…”

For some reason, Shinobu looked incredibly shocked.

“I was the problem!? Do you hate me, mom!?”

“What!? N-no, that isn’t it at all, Shinobu! That isn’t what I meant!!”

“No excuses! I’m taking a bath with grampa today!! You have to wait until tomorrow!”

“Hmm? That’s fine, but grampa likes his baths hot.”

“And gramma can join us.”

“Vfweh!?”

He suffered another shock.

“Th-then I’ll have to take my bath with Nee-chan!!”

“Honestly, why are you adults making such a fuss over a simple bath?”

“And Nii-chan can join us.”

“Not a chance.”

The third shock finally brought Shinobu to tears, so he ran from the Western-style living room and into the Japanese-style living room where the Youkai were gathered.

“Wahhhhh!! Kyuubi! Kuzunoha!! Everyone’s so mean! They’re all taking baths together without me!!”

“Ho ho ho. What a troublesome child. Now, how about you try grabbing my nine tails?”

“You wild fox, stop spoiling other people’s children. As the Kuzunoha, I will harden my heart and thoroughly teach him some manners!”

The boy and two animals made their way to the bath.

That Kyuubi isn’t related to the Japanese Killing Stone, is it? Well, I think they were originally Chinese and were a sign of good luck. But doesn’t Kuzunoha refer to an individual? Could that be the *Kuzunoha?*

After throwing open the changing room’s door and just before shutting it, teary Shinobu let out a shout.

“We all have to get along!!”

Despite all that, I could see no sign of any sort of bloody incident.

The problem was that I did not know what month, day, hour, and minute the danger would arrive. Of course, I doubted a year or two would pass with nothing happening.

Once the clock reached eleven at night, all the lights were turned out, and the family had all gone to sleep, a certain fact became much more obvious. Simply put…

“I have nothing to do…”

The time travel method was similar to an out-of-body experience, so I could slip through walls and doors without being seen and I didn’t need to worry about biological issues. In other words, I wasn’t sleepy. That may have sounded convenient as I only had one point of view and couldn’t rewind, but when nothing was happening, I got pretty bored.

I slipped through the door to Shinobu’s room a few times to check on him, but he was fast asleep with a giant fox curled up on either side of him.

“Mumble, mumble… Fluffy tails…”

“Keh heh heh! …I-I will never…forget this humiliation…”

I doubted I was going to find any important information watching this.

“I guess I should go back over what information I have.”

That was really all I could do. Then again, I wasn’t exactly overwhelmed by a bunch of information I had to sort through.

The Aburatori had apparently not suddenly appeared in this version of the past. He was living in a rundown mountain cabin doing something.

And I knew the Aburatori.

He had not tried to kill me no questions asked and had even warned me away. But at the same time, he was aware how dangerous and deadly he was.

That led me to the conclusion that he did not want to kill any children. Although I had yet to check inside that cabin. It was possible he was keeping me away because there was something “evil” in there he didn’t want me to see.

“That’s right.”

I doubted Shinobu was going to do anything here.

Leaving his side and heading out into the mountains wouldn’t be a bad idea. After all, I couldn’t predict when or where the incident would occur. I would have an easier time later if I gathered what information I could now while the danger was still low.

And that sped things up.

Maybe I was bored and starving for some stimulation or maybe I felt safe in this out-of-body experience state, but I felt no reluctance to head out into the dark mountains late at night where I knew the Aburatori was waiting.

I left the thatch-roof house and followed the farm roads.

Intellectual Villages were dark at night. Most crops used photosynthesis, so they were influenced by light and it was not good to shine unnecessary light on them. There were streetlights with the same sensors as automatic doors to ensure the safety of pedestrians, so the lights came on only where people and cars were passing by. However, they didn't react to me in my current state.

The inky darkness of the village was broken by the carpet of countless stars and the moonlight that pierced through the shadows.

Once I reached the mountain, a bit of a damp chill came over me.

I walked to the elevated clearing from before.

With no wind, I couldn't even hear the rustling of the branches. Late March was too early for the insects to wake up, so I couldn't hear any of them either. The silence was almost painful. And that may have been why I heard the whispering voices so clearly.

"Are you sure this will work?"

"Nine years. My calculations say nine years will fulfill all the conditions. That will liberate you."

"But that boy saw me. I want to be more certain."

"It's a *Kaeshigami*, remember? You'll be fine. You restrained yourself this long, and you only have a week until the limit. You can make it that long."

…*What? What are they talking about???*

The hoarse elderly voice was likely the Aburatori, but who was the young man? "That boy" probably meant young Shinobu, but I couldn't figure out the rest. Nine years, liberate, restrain, limit, certain…and Kaeshigami. I didn't know what they were doing here, but it didn't sound peaceful.

And just as I was thinking that, a young female voice spoke behind me.

"Hey, what's going on here? We have a visitor."

My heart jumped more at all the gazes focusing my way than at the loud voice.

The other two were focusing on the comment made by that young female speaker.

That meant they were aware of my presence.

"Hm? Where's this visitor, Ohatsu-san?"

"Here. I'm rubbing up against them right now."

"Yeah, but we can't see anything there…"

I slowly looked down.

A small dog was rubbing its cheek up against my right shin.

The Sune…kosuri?

It looked similar, but this wasn't the one that worked with Hishigami Mai. It spoke like a woman, it had a scarf around its neck, and it had a ribbon on its right ear.

The young man who had been speaking with the Aburatori then spoke in a seemingly random direction.

"Shikimi-saaan!! Can you see anything?"

"Don't ask me."

Surprisingly, this new voice came from directly overhead.

A girl in a kimono sat on one of the branches forming the tunnel of trees. She had a thick shimenawa around her waist instead of an obi, her long hair was a colorless white, and she was pretty yet eerie. The way she wore her hair up made it look like a strange flower, she had a surprisingly large chest, and her bare feet were dangling down, so I could see her soft-looking toes and the bottom of her feet. Her slender and lovely appearance was belied by tough mannerisms and how her arms stuck out from the collar instead of using the sleeves.

"My specialty is war, so I don't like spending a bunch of time gathering intelligence or setting everything up just right."

"Ha ha. And how do you expect me to do something that the founder of the Hishigami line can't?"

The founder of the Hishigami line.

Shikimi.

I had no idea what was going on, but I could feel unpleasant sweat pouring from my entire body. I wasn't entirely sure I could actually sweat in my nearly out-of-body experience state, though.

"You need to stop looking down and rejoicing when you find someone who can't do something. It's pathetic. You're going to be a father soon, so you need to fix that self-indulgent side of yours."

"Ohatsu-san, is the visitor still there?"

"Yes. It seems Youkai can tell 'somehow or other'. Sensitivity and accuracy seems to depend on the specific species, though."

"I see."

The young man seemed to be enjoying this situation.

A moment later, I could have sworn the moonlight got stronger. Or maybe the clouds had cleared out.

And…

This man in a dress suit was surrounded by a bizarre group: the Aburatori, Hishigami Shikimi, and a Sunekosuri named Ohatsu. But rather than the kind of clothing the nouveau riche would where just once to a special occasion, this man seemed perfectly at home in his dress suit, as if he had stepped out of an old painting. The term “old nobility” naturally came to mind. His sleek black hair was tied off at his waist and an old-fashioned monocle adorned his handsome face. At first I thought it was the monocle’s doing, but his eyes really were different colors. Also, he was accurately looking me right in the eye. He claimed he couldn’t see me, but his gaze seemed to stab directly into my mind.

“Nice to meet you, visitor.”

My heartrate increased and I felt like my throat was growing dry. In my out-of-body experience, no one from the past could harm me, but I felt like that assumption had been overturned and I had been thrown into the lion’s cage.

And without any concern for how I was feeling, he spoke.

“My name is Majina, spelled with the character for ‘curse’. Oh, and I don’t mind if you use my first name. For a variety of reasons, my family name is treated like an heirloom sword.”

As if dropping an even larger bomb than the Aburatori’s name, he pointed his thumb toward the family crest on his dress suit’s chest.

“Simply put, *I am the leader of Hyakki Yakou.* I don’t know the exact method, but since you’re relying on something like that, I can assume you’ve taken at least a step into our narrow field. In that case, I assume you’ve heard that name before.”

Part 4

Early in the morning on my second day in the past, young Shinobu was throwing a fit in the entranceway.

“No!!”

“Come on, Shinobu. Even Ubu wants you to let him go. They came here to spend the night on their journey, so they can’t move on if you hold onto him.”

Despite the Zashiki Warashi’s gentle attempt to persuade him, Shinobu shook his head with the Youkai in his arms.

As for that Youkai…

Is it just me or is that spider more than two meters long?

“That isn’t true! Ubu’s still a baby!! All he can say is ‘ogyaah’ and ‘baboo’!!”

“Well, he is an aggregation of stillbirths and infanticides.”

“I can’t throw a baby out!”

“But I’m pretty sure he’s lived for centuries, just like me. Come on, Shinobu. Let go.”

“Uuh… Smooch!!”

Ah!?

I-I’d always assumed my first kiss was with my parents or a relative, but…it was… with a bug!?

Shinobu of course showed no sign of noticing my shock and tearfully pulled out his Youkai Stamp.

“Listen, Ubu. We’re friends now. If you have any trouble, come see me. I’ll always be waiting!”

Some other sad exchanges like that followed and time passed.

While young Shinobu and Nagisa were playing in the large yard, another visitor showed up.

“Haaayaaabuuusaa-kuuun.”

A sexy high school girl with a kanzashi in her long black hair wore Noukotsu High School’s winter uniform even though it was spring.

Who is that? I know she must be a friend of my uncle’s, but still…

Incidentally, that uncle looked annoyed as he opened the door.

“What is it, beautiful student council president? Why the childish entrance?”

“Eh heh heh. I couldn’t help myself after seeing Shinobu-kun and Nagisa-chan playing in the yard. I’m jealous. I want to play badminton with them! Hey, hey. Could you go ask them too, Hayabusa-kun?”

But…

“This stranger is scary.”

“Stra-…!?”

“Oh, it’s Shinobu-chan’s uncle. H-hello.”

“Unc-…!!!???”

Both of them were left in shock.

The student council president even had tears in her eyes.

“Wh-what do you mean I’m a stranger? Remember when we played in the river and I held your hands to teach you the flutter kick? Or at the festival when we walked hand-in-hand in our yukatas? Or at the athletics festival when we won first prize in

the borrowing race together!? I was supposed to find something I could die happy if I had, so I chose you and ran to the finish line with you under my arm!!”

“Hmm???”

“You’ve forgotten! You’ve completely forgotten, haven’t you!? Heh. But I’m not petty enough to get hung up on the past. I just have to deepen our friendship starting today!!”

…I’m sorry, beautiful girl, but in ten years, I still won’t know who you are. And I can’t even imagine how chaotic a scene it was for the school’s beautiful student council president to race across the schoolyard in bloomers with a five or six year old boy under her arm.

The two high school students gradually held up their rackets and they began a doubles match with the president on Shinobu’s team and my uncle on Nagisa’s team.

“This person is too beautiful. I can’t get close.”

“Wh-what am I supposed to do about that? But if it means getting along with you, I’m willing to eat a ton of cakes and get super fat!!”

“President.”

The high school students must have mostly wanted to help out the kids because they leisurely kept the rally going while chatting with each other.

“By the way, Hayabusa-kun, that problem from before has gone up a rank. I still have no proof, though. It’s more of an atmosphere or a thorny nuance.”

“Yeah, I know what the underlings are up to, so I’ll hunt them down before long. But you need to make sure your GPS and alarm are working.”

“It must be tough for you too. But, well, it may just come with the territory for the Jinnai Brewery.”

“This is honestly no laughing matter. Of course, I haven’t lived a clean enough life to be surprised when some shiners show up.”

???

I wasn’t the only one tilting my head in confusion at that.

Shinobu and Nagisa also looked puzzled as they smashed the shuttlecock back and forth with some help from the high school students.

“What’s a shiner?”

“Shinobu-chan, it’s a type of sushi. I think the shiny silver fish are called that.”

“Then are we having sushi today? I can’t wait!!”

But when Shinobu saw the pasta with meat sauce served for lunch, a completely dead look came over his eyes.

“…I can’t accept this.”

“Eh!? You don’t like my cooking anymore!?”

My mom was left all alone in shock, but Shinobu’s attention turned to the flat screen TV as he covered his mouth in the red of tomato. The sports segment of the news was on, but in late March, there was nothing much happening in soccer or baseball. It was more about introducing some upcoming events.

“Look, Shinobu. The sake we made is on TV. It’s being used to commemorate their victory.”

“That bottle the sumo wrestler is holding?”

“Something from the Jinnai Brewery is the standard way of celebrating the spring competition. That bottle those baseball players are breaking in front of the camera is also ours. There’s even a rumored jinx saying teams that don’t end their spring training camp with something Jinnai will do terribly next season.”

“Oh… You’re amazing, grampa.”

Shinobu pointlessly spun around the fork he wasn’t entirely sure how to use. I could tell how hard it must be to get your kid to follow the family business. The special small happi coat he wore was probably meant to instill a sense of being a part of the industry (although it probably also had a lot to do with my doting parents.) He was an only child, so it would be a problem if he suddenly decided he wanted to be a rock star.

Once he had finished lunch and wiped off his mouth with a tissue, Shinobu began playing with the Zashiki Warashi.

“Nee-chan, look at me!”

“What is it, Shinobu?”

“Look at me!”

Shinobu was wiggling around on his back, but when the Zashiki Warashi approached, he grabbed onto her leg.

No…?

“I get in trouble if I climb the trees.”

“Well, it is dangerous and it can harm the older trees.”

“That’s why I’ll climb you. Nee-chan climbing!”

He began his after-lunch exercise.

But by afternoon, Nagisa was back with her St. Bernard.

“Sh-Shinobu-chan, I brought my What’s-This Wand.”

“What’s a What’s-This Wand?”

“My dad bought it for me. If you don’t know what something’s for, you wave the wand in front of it and it tells you. Wh-what’s this!?”

Is that a type of electronic dictionary?

Nagisa held out the toy with a CCD camera and image recognition system installed and she pointed it toward her St. Bernard.

After an electronic sound effect, it spoke in an artificial female voice.

“Guard dog of hell, two melons, hooray.”

“…”

“…”

With the same look as someone faced with a ridiculous machine translation, Shinobu and Nagisa left the What’s-This Wand on top of the shoe shelf in the entranceway.

“Anyway, let’s play with your dog! Do you want to use the ball or the flying disc?”

“Shinobu-chan. He’s saying to throw both.”

The St. Bernard barked and wagged its tail in full readiness. As I watched the dog race across the large yard, I happened to see the Zashiki Warashi circling around the veranda to the back yard.

“?”

I was supposed to be pursuing the truth of the past, so nothing was as irritating as scenes of complete normalcy. In order to gather whatever information I could, I followed the Zashiki Warashi.

And I found a sudden bombshell.

Majina of Hyakki Yakou was leaning against the house’s outer wall with his arms crossed.

“———————!!!???”

“Why are you here?”

“For a follow-up visit.”

Majina replied to the Zashiki Warashi’s stiff voice in an indifferent voice of his own while tracing his finger along the edge of his monocle.

“Don’t look so threatening. You really are worried about the Ver. 39 contained inside your body, aren’t you? You escaped long ago when it was still incomplete and unfinished and it hasn’t had any maintenance done in the century or more since. It could break at any time and no one knows what will happen when it does. Personally, it would frighten me more than a strange shape on the X-ray scan.”

“It’s not like you can do anything about it these days.”

“True enough. The Ver. 39 is a black box to us as well. We cannot reproduce it or create a new one. But that is exactly why I want you to rest easy. Hyakki Yakou cannot steal the technology even if we forcibly abducted you. As such, we have no

reason to. Having nothing to gain is the proof of peace. Now, let us shake hands in the theme park!”

He jokingly held out his hand for a handshake, but the Zashiki Warashi did not comply.

Her displeased look remained as he waved his hand at her.

“You don’t believe me?”

“Why should I after what you – well, your ancestors – did to me?”

“Fair enough.”

Majina let out an exasperated sigh.

He pointed his thumb at the family crest on his chest which was modeled after some kind of animal.

“This points to the Youkai that are completely removed from any ecosystem while also pointing to the frightening human imagination. Combine the two and you have Hyakki Yakou. It’s said that Hyakki Yakou has fallen quite a bit over the past hundred years, but that isn’t accurate. It would be better to say we were insane until one hundred years ago. My generation is attempting to return us to our original form, but I do wonder how that will turn out. Whether in politics, the military, or the chair of the company president, power is a devilish thing. Once it falls within your grasp, it will drag you down without end.”

Their conversation was cut off there.

The front yard had grown much noisier. I peeked around and saw…something wearing a worn-out kimono. The small figure looked both like a child and like an old person as it hung its head at the end of the yard.

“Sh-Shinobu-chan, this Youkai is called an Akaname.”

“Why can’t he come into the house? This fizzy stuff is great! Drink some!!”

The Akaname wasn’t a deadly Youkai. It was completely harmless. However, it would lick up the limescale from the bath, so it was not well-liked in a beverage-making family. Intellectual Village brands got their value from an image of high quality, so anything that would give an unclean impression was the same as adding poison to the bottle.

“This is unavoidable. My traits and your family are incompatible.”

“Nn…”

Shinobu tilted his head.

“Then how about you play with me outside? Don’t worry. I can get along with any Youkai!”

The Akaname was pulled into their group in no time at all.

And it did not end there.

“Sh-Shinobu-chaaan! Th-th-th-this is a God of Poverty!”

“C’mon over here.”

“Shinobu-chan, what is this giant caterpillar thing? Eh? Kodoku???”

“I don’t know what that is, but let’s play together.”

As the shrill voices of playing children reached him, the man calling himself the leader of Hyakki Yakou gently narrowed his eyes.

“When I hear the word exorcism, I picture someone borrowing the power of a god or buddha to unilaterally blast the evil spirit with a smug look on his face, but this is completely different.”

“…”

“The essence of what he’s doing is removing and dispersing spirits. Were they calling him Shinobu-kun? In that way, he is demonstrating the ideal form of what we do. … Even if we send the most virtuous priest on a rampage or send out a famous warrior with a spiritual sword in hand, there are some paranormal beings we simply cannot do anything about. But with Youkai that are immune to even the greatest violence, there are many stories of them leaving when approached in good faith. Gods of Poverty make all people equally poor, but if you fearlessly accept them in and show them proper respect, the stories say they will give you great riches. The Kodoku is the same I believe. They wield the most powerful curse which no charm or barrier can defend against, and once affected, the victim’s entire clan will be destroyed. But a man who tried to sacrifice himself for his family by swallowing the insect supposedly ended up living a long life with no ill effects.”

The man honestly sounded envious.

“I wonder how many people who can pull that off still exist in our narrow field today.”

He almost seemed ashamed of his own lack of virtue.

“We acquire all the power we desire, but in exchange for increasing the rank of our soul, we forget how to respect the paranormal. We are all distorted individuals who can only conquer our fears by becoming a greater monster than the monsters themselves. …And because we fear being devoured by the insects on the ground once we lose speed, we build ourselves up more and more, creating a negative snowball effect. Truly a vicious circle. To be honest, we have too much power. We have enough to wipe out the human race several times over. I would like to change the direction of our field before that power spills out or the ever-expanding balloon bursts.”

This seemed to connect the normal scenery of the past and the bloody Hyakki Yakou I had seen in the present.

What have I been doing without even realizing it?

If the world really was that simple, could that messy conclusion have been avoided even when faced by such a violent Youkai?

“Is that what you’re doing in this village?”

“That is a test case. The Aburatori started it on his own, but since he was about to fail, we decided to lend a helping hand. This is a useful test for us as well. It will provide a concrete outline to our formless ideal. It’s the perfect presentation for the more destructive among us.”

What? What is he talking about?

Since it had to do with the Aburatori, it probably had some effect on the main incident here, but the Zashiki Warashi showed no real intent to stop him. No matter how good-for-nothing she might be, I wanted to believe she would act differently if the plan involved killing small children.

“Do you really think you can pull of the Kaeshigami?”

“It truly is just an ideal at the moment. But while it was on a completely different level, there is the example of Fujiwara no Michizane. Instead of starting with a Tatarigami born of human hatred, this Kaeshigami will begin with an evil Youkai. It would be perfect if we could gain more stability by downsizing that method.”

The group in the front yard must have decided playing with the dog and the ball would be difficult with so many people, so they shifted to playing house. As they sat in a circle and spoke together, Shinobu swung his arms around and gave a shout.

“I need to call Nee-chan too! This would be way more fun with her! Nee-chaaaan!!”

Majina shrugged while still leaning against the outer wall.

The Zashiki Warashi stuck her index finger against his nose to silently tell him not to show himself. Then she walked out from behind the house and toward Shinobu, Nagisa, and the others.

Shinobu was the first to speak.

“Since you’re our newest family member, you’re the baby, Nee-chan.”

“Vweh!?”

“Shinobu-chan. I don’t think that suits this Youkai.”

“It wouldn’t be a game if we act like normal! It’s fun because we do something different!!”

“Sh-Shinobu-chan. Umm, I was already worried when you made the dog the father, so…”

Hm? So how’s she going to handle this one?

The Hyakki Yakou leader and I both focused on the front yard.

Now, Zashiki Warashi, how are you going to answer that six-year-old’s request!?

“Gyah! Gyahh!! Gyahhh!!!! Baboo. I want milk, papa. Baboo, baboo.”

She…

“She did iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!! That Youkai with a 98 cm bust just went into full baby mooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooode!!”

“Well, a Zashiki Warashi is a collective spirit of the babies killed during famines, so maybe this is what she’s always wanted to do.”

I felt like some strange beams were shooting from my eyes.

And while Shinobu was innocently holding a toy baby bottle to the Zashiki Warashi’s mouth, Nagisa looked horrified.

The scene before my eyes had short-circuited some wiring deep in my head, so I hadn’t noticed at first.

But…

“…!? You…know I’m here!?”

The previous night, he had needed the (female) Sunekosuri to tell him I was there, but now Majina was giving me an amused look with his back against the wall.

“One night is plenty of time to put together a technique, visitor. I would recommend not confusing me with your everyday Package maker.”

Oh, no.

Oh, no. Oh, no! Oh, no!!

How much would this affect history? While I did have to alter history at some point to resolve the true Aburatori incident without using the Zashiki Warashi’s Ver. 39, how much influence would this small conversation have? What was going to happen now?

“Do not worry. History has some elasticity to it. Or maybe you could call it an acceptable margin of error. If the smallest phenomenon would alter the whole like the butterfly effect, then the world could easily collapse just from having you standing there. Right?”

“…”

“In other words, as long as *you* make no extreme contact with anything, the flow of history will not change. Having me speak to you will not change anything. The controller is in your hands and you will not spread changes uncontrollably. Yes, this was a well-thought-out structure that took safety into consideration. I can’t quite understand why *it has the same scent as us*, though.”

My words could reach someone now and this man stood closer than anyone to the truth of the past concerning the Aburatori.

“If only the Aburatori could join that circle as well,” said Majina as he viewed the chaotic game of house including a God of Poverty and a Kodoku bug. “Unfortunately, he is the type who brings death simply from meeting him, just like the Shichinin Misaki or the Killing Stone. Some preparations are needed for the first step to remove that wickedness. That is, to make it so he no longer brings death simply from meeting him.”

“…”

Make it so he no longer brings death simply from meeting him?

You mean make a deadly Youkai not deadly?

“It isn’t that rare an idea. Some Youkai are old gods that were brought down to that level. There are also foxes and tanuki that gained divinity from their popularity with the people. And if you look to a higher level, there is even a vengeful spirit that tried to destroy Kyoto but was raised to the level of a heavenly god. However, reproducing it with human techniques instead of relying on a miracle is another issue altogether.”

That was the Kaeshigami.

It was the phenomenon in which a feared being was transformed into a god. They became a being that was both feared and respected.

“If the Kaeshigami is completed, that deadly Youkai will be able to fully switch off his trait of indiscriminate killing. Or he can switch it on of his own will to gain power greater than that of a mere Youkai. Of course, it would be less about providing an allover power boost and more about using more detailed control to reduce the energy loss.”

It was true that anything was fine if it would defang that monster.

However, I couldn’t see why Hyakki Yakou would hold back and use such a roundabout method on the worst of the deadly Youkai. He was clearly different from a Yuki Onna or Nekomata. He only thought about killing children, he had built a time travel Package, and he had even absorbed the Zashiki Warashi to obtain even greater power. He was a monster among monsters.

But…

“The name Aburatori might fill you with negative emotions.”

A probing tone entered Majina’s voice.

“But you might have seen things differently if you were more like Shinobu-kun over there.”

Part 5

By evening, I concluded Shinobu wasn’t going to do anything else even if I continued watching him, so I left the thatch-roof house and made my way to the Aburatori’s mountain clearing.

“The Comfort Association is known as the Japanese branch of one of the top four networks, and the police are on alert due to rumors that they are holding a large event in the near future. The rumors say they will be reorganizing and…”

The ground was covered in underbrush, the trees created a canopy overhead, and the dark rundown cabin sat in front of me. Hishigami Shikimi may have been watching a 1seg TV somewhere, but I couldn’t tell where even after turning in a full circle.

Also, two Youkai faced each other in front of the rotting cabin.

One was Ohatsu, the female Sunekosuri working with Majina, and the other was the Aburatori with his large conical hat hiding his face.

They were speaking to each other.

“If the unexpected happens, take care of things afterwards.”

“The unexpected isn’t going to happen. After all, our boss is working on this.”

“But I saw him. I saw Jinnai Shinobu. No one was supposed to come here.”

“Don’t worry. You’ve resisted killing any children for nearly nine years now.”

“That was only because I didn’t see any. Viewing my target has resurrected the hunger inside me. At this rate, there is a chance I will break the seal and attack. So…”

“You have less than a week to go. Even if the seal cracks little by little, you will still become a Kaeshigami as long as it doesn’t reach its limit before then. You won’t have to kill anyone anymore. Isn’t that right?”

What was this about?

The Aburatori seemed afraid of killing children…of killing my past self.

“For one thing, you aren’t at fault here.”

“That excuse doesn’t hold water.”

“The Aburatori is based in the fear of a child suddenly vanishing…*and the dark desire and curiosity that makes people want to talk about such things as if they actually happened.* They make a show of being afraid on the surface, but the human heart can’t help but tell those stories. Monsters are frightening, but if that monster really did exist, it might get rid of those troublesome children. They might not have to kill them in the bath or bathroom as soon as they are born. You were given form by the thoughts of those sickening parents who have no issue with abusing or abandoning their children. You were born from that desire, so you yourself aren’t at fault.”

“I said that excuse doesn’t hold water!!”

The Aburatori’s shout was followed by silence.

I could only hear the ominous sound of the rustling leaves.

“I understand…”

He spoke in a barely audible voice.

“I hate it, and hate it, and hate it…but in the end, I do understand the feelings of the parents who made me like this. I understand how unpleasant children are, I understand how nice it would be if they would just disappear, and I understand how wonderful it would be if someone else would do it for you! It doesn’t matter which came first. I was made to be like this. Without me to receive those feelings, the parents of the later generations might not have felt them at all. It’s a chicken or the egg issue… At this point, my very existence might be creating evil feelings within people and then drawing them out!”

“…”

That was the system that had been built. It was the role he had been given.

He was a murderer to be despised by everyone.

No excuses were permitted and no thought was given to his circumstances.

He was there to receive the evil feelings of those who were not even aware of those feelings inside themselves.

That was all he was meant to be.

“So please don’t believe anything I tell you. Please don’t believe my soul. It doesn’t matter what I say. The instant you deem it impossible, kill me. I don’t want to play this role anymore. I don’t want to become a being that simply completes a system with no thoughts of my own. I don’t want to be a monster that brutally slaughters those small children without batting an eye.”

This scene completely reversed my image of the Aburatori.

At first, I thought maybe I had stepped into a twisted parallel world.

But in that case…

…What was the Aburatori I saw before? How did such a conflicted deadly Youkai end up as such a crazed monster?

“There’s nothing to worry about.”

“How can you be so sure? Not even I trust myself.”

“Because.” The female Sunekosuri narrowed her eyes a little. “Someone has come here for you.”

The Aburatori followed her gaze and turned to face me.

No, his eyes passed right through me. He was looking behind me. I turned around too and saw a small form there.

It was Shinobu.

It was myself as I apparently came here ten years ago.

“Wha-…?”

The Aburatori was dumbfounded, but Shinobu smiled as he ran through the underbrush. He approached with no caution whatsoever.

“Big news! Big news!”

He swung his arms around.

“We’re having Salisbury steak for dinner tonight! Mom’s finally going all out! I have to tell everyone!! Big news! Big news!”

“…”

“Mom’s Salisbury steak is amazing. She puts a fried egg on top!”

It was a silly bit of breaking news, but it sounded like he meant it as a secret for only his friends. That meant he was including that worst of the deadly Youkai in that group.

For a while, the Aburatori seemed unable to move.

The Youkai silently clenched his teeth as Shinobu shifted gears.

“Come to think of it, I haven’t given you a stamp yet.”

“Don’t worry about me,” said the female Sunekosuri. “Keep that lonely old man company.”

“We can all hang out together! Now you’re a Friend Youkai too!!”

This was a conversation from an impossibly distant world.

That bloody Youkai would never have dreamed of reaching that world from the moment he had been born into this world.

“Do you understand, Ohatsu?”

The Aburatori finally spoke almost under his breath.

His voice seemed on the verge of vanishing.

“Even now, I cannot stop myself from categorizing the life before my eyes as a target. In the end, I can only do what everyone wants from me. I know that the more perfectly I fulfill the legend of the Aburatori, the more easily those dark desire will be thrown onto me, and yet…!!”

Confliction.

Agony.

Despair.

That which is bright does not always save. That which is kind does not always heal. Sometimes, it becomes a cruel mirror that reflects one’s own ugliness. As she accepted that pain, the female Sunekosuri let out a slow sigh.

But was the Aburatori truly ugly?

Weren’t the human adults who made him like that simply forcing this onto him so they wouldn’t be at fault?

Shinobu tilted his head curiously while only seventy centimeters away from certain death.

“Hm? What are you talking about? A game?”

This was the backbone of the story.

But what kind of awful ending lay in wait?

What ending was so bad that it required that Zashiki Warashi to get involved, release the power of the Ver. 39, and distort history itself?

Part 6

I followed Shinobu down the narrow farm roads back to the thatch-roof house.

We got back just in time to see my uncle leaving.

“What are you doing, Nii-chan? Heading out?”

“Yeah. You don’t leave the house, Shinobu. It’s scary outside once it gets dark.”

“Hm? But we’re having Salisbury steak today! We need to all eat it together!”

As my uncle walked toward the storage shed a short distance from the house, I could hear a metallic jangling. Shinobu tilted his head and my mom ran out to the front door.

“Ahhh! Wait, Shinobu, where did Hayabusa-kun go!? He hasn’t left the garage yet, has he!?”

“He said he’s heading out. He’s playing at night. He really is an adult.”

“S-someone stop him! Before he finally kills someone!!”

With an obvious engine sound effect, a large electric scooter left the storage shed.

“?”

Night was beginning, so Shinobu would be staying at home. That meant he was unlikely to have any contact with the Aburatori. The odds were good following him around would only be a waste of time. With that in mind, I turned right back around and hopped onto the back seat of my uncle’s bike.

I technically wasn’t touching the floor or ground when I walked, but as soon as I thought of myself as “riding” the scooter, I stuck to it. My uncle smoothly operated the bike and raced down the dark farm road.

I could hear a conversation coming from the cell phone stuck in the holder near the handlebars.

One side was the female upperclassman who had played badminton during the day, but the other was a gloomy-sounding male voice.

Who is that?

“Since you were after someone connected to Jinnai, I assumed someone like Shinobu-kun was in trouble, but I certainly didn’t expect the danger to reach me.”

“Sh-shut up. I went with the most surefire method. That kid’s surrounded by Youkai, so the older Hayabusa is the easier target, right? A-and with a hostage, I have even less to worry about.”

“Are you sure that was all? I bet you wanted to capture the school’s beautiful student council president so you could have your own reward. You were probably planning to avoid mentioning the hostage when you hand Hayabusa-kun over to the adults. That way you could do whatever you wanted to my body. Peh heh heh.”

“Shut up!! You just have to keep that mouth shut and do what I say!!”

I had never seen my uncle give off such a powerful aura of anger.

He operated the cellphone to bring up a GPS map.

At that point, I finally realized what the metallic jangling was. There were thick chains wrapped around his waist and held in place by a padlock.

Meanwhile, the remote conversation continued.

“When it comes to guard dogs, Nagisa-chan’s St. Bernard is pretty cute.”

“Wh-what are you talking about?”

“But did you know that her parents had the dog put through the training of a police dog and a war dog so it will tear out the throat of any suspicious person who gets close? A cheap jackknife isn’t going to be much use against that.”

My uncle did something with the bike’s controls.

The headlights vanished and the engine sound effect stopped.

The mass of metal raced along at over sixty kph without producing any light or noise.

“But what I have is more of a hunting dog than a guard dog. Heh heh. I guess it would be a little sad to call him a mad dog.”

“Wh-what? Dog??? Are you saying there’s a dog hiding around here!?”

“He’s already here. And my dog is a lot fiercer than a St. Bernard. Unfortunately for you.”

It happened immediately afterwards.

Without hitting the brakes at all, my uncle hit someone standing in the middle of the farm road.

“B-bhbfh!? Bahbh!! Egbhgahh!?”

The person flew into the dry paddy field and groaned from the ground, unable to get up.

My uncle turned the electric scooter around and his upperclassman cheerfully waved at him in the darkness.

“Yahoo, Hayabusa-kun. Can I leave the rest to you?”

“Yes, you can. Sorry about the trouble.”

“So you arrive five minutes after I call you and don’t hesitate to hit the guy at full speed? I can really feel the love☆”

“If you get too carried away, I’ll force you on a thrill ride along the zig-zagging mountain pass.”

My uncle stepped off the bike and onto the narrow farm road. He then looked down at the gloomy boy who had been knocked into the paddy a level below.

He still couldn’t get up, so he shouted up at my uncle while foaming at the mouth.

“I…I can’t…I can’t believe you!! You tried to kill me!! You did!! Ha…ha ha. You know what’s going to happen when I call the police here, don’t you!?”

“*Hm? Why the hell are you still alive?*”

He did not try to intimidate the boy and he did not shout angrily at him. That casual nuance seemed to overpower the boy more than anything else. He was overpowered by the difference in experience.

Then the upperclassman gave a warning from the side.

“Hey, hey. You can think it as much as you want, but try not to actually say anything about trying to kill him. This might not qualify as justified self-defense. Not that there’s a lawyer here.”

“J-just-justified self-defense!? B-by hitting s-someone with a bike!?”

“Yeah,” said my uncle as if it didn’t particularly matter.

And not that the laws didn’t matter. That the boy’s life didn’t matter.

“Justified self-defense doesn’t just apply to yourself. If you use a weapon that happened to be nearby and cause less damage than would have been caused otherwise, it cancels everything out. So as long as I did less damage than a knife to the vitals, it isn’t a problem. But what about you? You’re the one that *went out of your way* to prepare a knife and put together this kidnapping plot.”

“Ee…ee!!”

“You really are stupid.”

The beautiful student council president seemed to spit the words out from a position of absolute superiority.

“How did you end up a pawn for *a large criminal organization*?”

“It was probably that Hidarugami Diet.”

“Don’t answer for him. It’s more fun to hear it from him.”

“You sure are cruel… He doesn’t even have the skill to put together a Package. He only created a website to trick people into paying him, so isn’t this enough punishment?”

“But unfortunately, that *weight loss drug* was actually a code word for you-know-what. The *large criminal organization* must have thought he was breaking into their market. Not that I’m about to feel sorry for someone who tricked people out of their money.”

“They probably told him they’d let him off the hook if he did some work for them. Jinnai sake is used all over: to commemorate big sumo victories, to commemorate pro baseball victories, and even as an offering at the Ise Shrine. But it isn’t uncommon for people in the criminal underworld to want some. Like for *a large criminal organization’s* rituals.”

So that’s it.

After pouring their soul into that sake, my grandpa and dad weren’t going to send it somewhere like that. After all, they would even temporarily refuse to do business with a bar that allowed its patrons to drive drunk. Even so, there were some who would still want some Jinnai sake.

And in the Aburatori’s forest, I had heard some news about a big event being held by a group called the Comfort Association.

So…

“I guess that means this guy was the source of those old-fashioned threatening letters reaching my home.”

“Maybe. Hayabusa-kun, how about we hand him over to the cops and let the professionals handle the rest?”

I recalled the letter my grandpa had chopped up with scissors.

It must have asked them to hand over some Jinnai sake if they didn’t want any harm to come to their family.

“Well, given how they work, there’s a good chance they’ll chop this guy off like a lizard’s tail and blame it all on him.”

The student council president’s words gave the boy a clear view of his fate.

That attacker, who most likely attended the same high school as the other two, squeezed out the very last of his strength and jumped to his feet.

“Hee…hee hee!! Hee hee…hee! Hee hee hee!!”

“What, you want more? Just how sad a guy are you?”

“My knife? Where’d my knife go? Dammit, it’s too dark to see!!”

“And as long as we know you have a knife prepared, it means you’re armed, even if you don’t have it in hand at the moment. That means this qualifies as justified self-defense. Unfortunately for you.”

A jangling came from my uncle.

“And did you know this, skinny boy? A giant machete or Japanese sword would be in violation of the Swords and Firearms Control Law. A wooden sword or metal pipe

would be borderline. There's precedent for nunchucks found at an inspection violating the Minor Offenses Act."

The sound came from the thick, thick chain held in place around his waist by a padlock.

He wrapped one end around his fist and smiled as he continued speaking.

"But there's no law against wrapping chains around yourself as a fashion statement. And yet swinging them around makes for a more frightening weapon than a metal bat. Strange, isn't it?"

Yeah, this is hopeless.

My uncle was too used to this. Whether the boy had his knife or not, his fate was sealed.

Part 7

My uncle was the day's MVP, but after taking the beautiful student council president home on his big electric scooter and then driving back home, my dad and grandpa beat him up and threw him in the shed. The series of events progressed so smoothly that I could tell it happened all the time. Just how often was my uncle getting into fights?

After locking the thick door, my dad and grandpa began speaking to each other.

"Apparently, Atou's daughter wasn't hurt. …He did a pretty good job."

"Hey, we can discuss the rest over some drinks. Nothing makes sake taste better than these stories, so it'd be a shame to let it go to waste."

…*This is the problem.*

After returning to the house, I found the Zashiki Warashi and some other Youkai sitting in a circle in the parlor. The others seemed to be a Nurarihyon and a Kasha.

"Come to think of it, I showed up in the latest entry of that Youkai summoning RPG series."

"Oh, dear. So you had your big debut, Kasha-san?"

"Was that sarcasm? You Zashiki Warashi are just like the Yuki Onna! You always get chosen! You even got to be the exposition character for the Youkai Stamp movie!!"

Everyone worked to calm down the angry Nurarihyon.

"I don't like how they illustrated me as a cat surrounded by fire. I know I'm lucky to show up at all, but still."

"Well, the outline of a Youkai changes from generation to generation. I started as a relative of the Umibouzu, but the next thing I knew, I was the leader of all Youkai."

“It sure is trouble when cultures combine or when you’re mixed with or identified with another Youkai. I could accept it if it made me divine like the Dakini-Ten, though.”

I heard the sound of an electric guitar coming in from outside the room.

I initially wondered if it was my uncle in delinquent mode, but he was still locked in the shed. When I peeked out, it really wasn’t him. Five tanuki held musical instruments in front of young Shinobu in the Buddhist altar room.

“Yaaaaay! Thanks for showing up to today’s Tanuki☆Bayashi concerrrrrrrrrrrrrttttttttttttttttttt!”

“Gramma goes to sleep at nine, so only until then.”

I had no idea how a tanuki’s paws could hold the pick or press down on the strings, but they played well enough. I thought quietly to myself as I listened.

“I guess that’s going to be it for today…”

Even after the Jinnai house quieted down, the outside world was of course still on the move. If I visited the Aburatori’s forest, it was possible I would get some new information on the Aburatori.

But…

He didn’t seem like much of a threat at the moment while working with Hyakki Yakou. Was he really at the center of this incident? I couldn’t afford to miss the crucial moment if something else happened to be at the center.

Today, I hadn’t noticed that my uncle and Atou-san(?) had gotten involved in some other incident. I wanted to avoid overlooking something like that again.

Where would I start the following day? Between Shinobu, the Zashiki Warashi, the Jinnai house, the Aburatori, and Hyakki Yakou, what was I supposed to focus on? The lack of any obvious malice or benefits did not mean I could rest easy. I knew that a large incident was guaranteed to tear down this temporary peace.

“I’m getting sleepy…”

“Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh? But we were just getting warmed uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuup!”

“I’m going to sleep right here…”

“(Twannnnggg!!) Ky-kyah! Don’t hug me out of the blue!”

“Leader…”

“Our hard-rock leader…”

“A-ahem. You can’t Shinobu-chaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan! You haven’t brushed your teeth yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeet! Honestlyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!”

The tanuki picked up Shinobu's limp form and ran toward the bathroom.

A new commotion began in there. Shinobu was supposed to have been brushing his teeth, but he had grabbed some toys instead.

"This is the proof you're a man!"

"Shinobu-chaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!? Why are you drawing on a thief mustache with a black peeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeen!?"

"Nn! Grampa, dad, and Nii-chan all shave, so now I can too!"

He was moving around what seemed to be soap made to look like a T-shaped shaver. The commotion only grew when he drew thief mustaches on the tanuki that were already covered in fur.

It was a heartwarming scene that looked like something from a children's book.

But I knew the moment of doom was approaching.

What exactly was going to happen here?

Part 8

It was early morning on the third day since I had traveled to the past.

In the Buddhist altar room, Shinobu was forcing a dandy look while holding a nearly square piece of seaweed in front of a bucket of sushi rice. The Zashiki Warashi sat across the tea table from him.

"Hand-rolled sushi is great. It's fun making it myself."

"You really do like things like this, Shinobu."

"Natto is fun too. I love how mixing it feels."

"Ugh… I-I'll pass on that one."

Shinobu and the Zashiki Warashi got down to wrapping the sushi.

"There's gotta be cheese. There's gotta be avocado. There's gotta be fish sausage."

"Why does your hand-rolled sushi always come out so very American, Shinobu?"

"Then I'll give this special one to you, Nee-chan. Say 'ah'."

"Ah."

That breakfast of half-fun and half-eating came to an end.

It was still morning, but Nagisa apparently wasn't coming over today. Shinobu trotted over to where the Zashiki Warashi was lazing around so as not to get in the way of the cleaning.

"Are you free, Nee-chan? Or are you busy?"

“What is it, Shinobu?”

“Oh, too bad. You look busy.”

“Really, what is it!? Don’t leave me behind!!”

The Zashiki Warashi clung to him and they collapsed into a ball. Shinobu was holding a thick picture book…no, it was some kind of kid’s textbook.

He sat on her lap and they read through the book together.

“The dog says…woof woof!”

“That’s right. Now, Shinobu, what about the car?”

“Vroom vroom.”

“Correct. Next…how about soba?”

“Hmm?”

Shinobu turned his head to look at her long black hair.

“I know! Soba goes rustle rustle!”

“Wrong. It goes slippery slippery.”

“Ehhh? That doesn’t sound right. Ice is what goes slippery slippery!”

My grampa called for Shinobu, so he hopped up from the sexy Youkai’s lap and raced out of the Japanese-style living room.

As the Zashiki Warashi closed the book and set it aside, my mom spoke to her while using a cyclone vacuum cleaner.

“He calls us grampa, gramma, dad, mom, Nii-chan, and Nee-chan.”

“?”

“To be honest, I wanted him to call me mama or mommy.” She pouted her lips. “But he was influenced by everyone around him, so the next thing I knew, he was calling me mom. And they all spoil him so much, so the next thing I know, I’m the one that has to stop him as the nagging mother! I want to spoil him too! Besides, I’m the one that went through so much pain giving birth to him!!”

“My condolences. That’s all I can say. …Ow, ow, ow! Where do you think you’re sucking at me with that vacuum cleaner nozzle!? What do you mean I sounded like it didn’t have anything to do with me? It really didn’t have anything to do with-…ow, ow, ow, ow!!”

The loud sound of the vacuum cleaner continued as my mom began some pretty extreme sexual harassment against that Youkai, but then she tilted her head.

“What did my father-in-law want with Shinobu? I doubt he wants him to help in the brewery.”

“That’s a good question. I have nothing better to do, so I’ll go collect Shinobu.”

I followed the two of them from the Japanese-style living room and down the hallway to the Western-style one.

“I just wish Shinobu was a little more polite. I’d love to have a cute little child like Nagisa-chan. You know what I mean? You do, don’t you!?”

“Yes, yes. Go talk to your husband about that one.”

As expected, my grampa was playing with Shinobu during a break in his work.

However…

“Ah ha ha!! Poop, penis, poop, penis, poop!!”

“Wah ha ha ha ha!!”

“Ah.”

I averted my gaze from that hopeless scene and looked to the women in the doorway.

My mom and the Zashiki Warashi had an utterly dead look in their eyes.

“Aaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!???”

I let out a scream, but before I could will my grampa to run away, the women grabbed his arms, shoulders, and head.

Those demons from hell had deep shadows falling over their faces, but their eyes alone shined brightly.

“Father, we need to talk.”

“I think someone needs to teach you that there is a limit to everything.”

“D-don’t be silly!! Dirty words are the standard for kids his age! Right? Right!? You know what I mean, don’t you!?”

He franticly tried to escape, but the two women walked down the long, long hallway and vanished.

I’ve heard of a secret prison cell as one of the Seven Mysteries of the Jinnai House, but surely that isn’t true. It’s only a story to scare the children, right?

That was when my small gramma showed up.

“Oh, dear. What are you doing here, Shinobu?”

“Grampa was taken away.”

“?”

“Poop.”

“…I understand completely now. Take that damn old man to the third door!!”

All emotion vanished from her face and then she too disappeared.

What is the third door? Would I be happier not knowing?

Shinobu had nothing to do now that everyone had left, so he began chatting with some Youkai who showed up.

“The word Oni is a mixture of the original Chinese word ‘gui’ meaning devil and the Japanese word ‘on’ meaning hidden. It originally referred to all spiritual beings, but due to the influence of Noh and Kabuki, we ended up being muscular, with a punch perm, horns, and a tiger stripe loincloth! They forced that image onto us and now they tell the oni to leave because we’re scary!! How is that fair!? Hmph!”

“Hm? What do you mean they tell the oni to leave?”

“Oh? Does your home only ask the good fortune to come in? Wonderful, wonderful.”

The doorbell rang.

I poked my head out into the hallway and saw my uncle answering the door.

The visitor was…Nagisa maybe?

“Oh, it’s Shinobu-chan’s uncle. G-good morning!”

“(Stab) Unc-…!?”

“Thanks to your advice, uncle, I don’t lose to Shinobu-chan in races anymore! Thanks, uncle!!”

“(Stab stab) Unc-… O-oh…is that so? You’re here for Shinobu, aren’t you? Wait just a second. Heyyy!”

The repetition of the word uncle caused all the more psychological damage when combined with that innocent smile, but my high school aged uncle managed to shout for Shinobu.

Based on their previous behavior patterns, Shinobu and Nagisa were most likely going to play in the large yard. And I wasn’t going to get much information while they were having fun.

Shinobu had started seeing Nagisa home every time though, and he stopped by a lot of places on his way back. That of course included the Aburatori’s forest.

“It might not be a bad idea to make a visit there.”

I had been thinking all night.

If I was seeing the truth behind the Aburatori incident, then there were only two major possibilities.

One: The Kaeshigami ritual to make the Aburatori harmless ends in failure.

Two: Someone was lying.

Perhaps Hyakki Yakou's Kaeshigami ritual would not actually make the Aburatori harmless or perhaps the Aburatori was not as cooperative as he was letting on.

"…"

Was one of those Hyakki Yakou members lying or not? Figuring that out would help a lot. I would be able to decide how to face the situation. Of course, I was only a high school student and I couldn't read their minds from the subtle movements of their eyes or trembling of their lips like some kind of professional profiler, but if I observed them during some especially emotional moment, I might notice something a little off.

I doubted they would make any kind of mistake while working together as Hyakki Yakou. Everything there would be within their expectations and would have settled together like gelatin.

If there was any irregular element, it was the presence of young Shinobu.

Him speaking with and influencing the Aburatori had to be unexpected, even if just slightly. That solidified situation would melt and shift like liquid.

In that case, it had to be when Shinobu contacted the Aburatori or Hyakki Yakou.

Or around that time.

Before and after Shinobu showed up. Before and after Shinobu left. It wouldn't hurt to look out for any changes in their actions or behavior then.

With that in mind, I needed to get to work.

I left the thatch-roof house and walked down the narrow farm road running between the paddy fields. I passed what looked like a fiber-optic workman's van and a flying Ittan-Momen as I made my way to the mountain.

That Youkai stood in front of the cabin today as well.

He may have been able to leave while the Kaeshigami project was ongoing because I seemed to find him there whenever I showed up.

It was a strange feeling since the Aburatori was supposed to be elusive and impossible to catch.

"Hello, visitor. Why are you here so early?"

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

The Aburatori was one thing, but where were these three spending the nights? They felt like they didn't live actual lives. Or rather, like they appeared from the mist and vanished into the mist.

"What does he think he's doing? While we can't match the technique used, the one using it clearly has no idea what he's doing. It's like handing an idiot a cellphone."

"Now, now, Ohatsu-san. I like this kind of thing. It's been so long since I've been able to speak with someone without having to try to read their hand and watch out for murderous intent."

"You do know you're about to be a father, don't you? You need to support a family, so get rid of that pathetic smile and be a little more cautious."

"A…father?"

I wasn't sure if Majina could hear me or not, but he bashfully scratched at his cheek.

"My wife is near the end of her pregnancy. To be honest, she could give birth at any time now. I'm really not ready for it, though."

"What an awful husband. His wife is suffering and here is out on a business trip."

"You don't understand how scary the maternity ward is for a man, Ohatsu-san! All I can do is wait on the bench, so what am I even supposed to do!? Oh, no. Just thinking about is making my skin crawl…!"

"Honestly, the woman's position there is ten or even a hundred times worse. Don't start crying when all you're doing is watch, you pathetic man."

"I have a hard time believing you know anything about that, Shikimi-san."

"What are you talking about? As the founder of the Hishigami line, I used to have an impressive body. It's just that my eternal youth technique is a little too effective and I shrink on a daily basis."

This conversation did not suit the name Hyakki Yakou in the slightest. My expression just about softened, but then it hit me.

I knew how this would turn out.

In the "present", Hafuri was the leader of Hyakki Yakou.

If a girl of about ten had been forced up to that position, what did that mean for her father here?

They believed in blood, so if someone was forced up to a higher position, it could only mean one thing.

"…"

"Hm? What is it? You look like you're at a funeral."

"He's probably shocked by how pathetic you're acting," said Ohatsu. "Who would ever believe *you're* the leader of the great Hyakki Yakou?"

“I don’t blame him,” added Hishigami Shikimi. “The gap in expectations surprised me when I first met him as well.”

“I think it’s wrong for people to have that frightening image of us to begin with. Maybe we should change our name to Kanai Anzen or Mubyou Sokusai.”[1]

“Everyone would assume we went soft the instant you had a kid, so don’t you dare.”

It was almost certain that this leader of Hyakki Yakou and his wife were going to die.

I didn’t know how they would die, but if it was anything too dangerous, I couldn’t assume Ohatsu and Hishigami Shikimi wouldn’t in danger too.

Abandoning them because it was “their destiny” would have been the right thing to do.

Looking at it positively and being glad that the baby inside the wife’s belly would survive would have been the right thing to do.

But there was a possibility here.

A single statement from me could change something. Was it truly “right” to stay silent and watch them walk down that dead-end of a path?

We were selfishly interfering with history in order to defeat the Aoandon and protect Japan’s future, so I could not afford to change anyone else’s history. But who had decided that was the “right” thing to do?

I didn’t know what was “right”.

Most likely, no one knew.

But.

But!!

“Hyakki Yakou believes in blood. My generation will eventually come to an end and the child in my wife’s belly will take over.”

Majina seemed to be staring into the distance as he spoke.

He seemed to believe he would be able to hand the baton over to Hafuri once she was fully grown.

“So I want to search out all the distortions and problems in Hyakki Yakou before that happens. I don’t want it to be some bloody organization. I want to be able to hand down a warm organization that can coexist with the paranormal without needing to bind it using fear and violence.”

This was not a name on a document.

Nor was it someone from the past who had already died, been burned to ashes, and been buried below a gravestone.

---

[1] Kanai Anzen = Household Safety. Mubyou Sokusai = Good Health.

Once I looked at it that way, I couldn't resist.

I forced out the voice that I was unsure he could even hear.

"In that case…you can't keep doing things the way you are."

"?"

"*In the world I know, the name Majina is nowhere to be found. The leader of Hyakki Yakou is a girl of about ten named Hafuri.*"

"…I see."

He displayed no obvious killer intent, but neither did he seem frightened or confused.

This young man named Majina simply gave a sad smile.

A single word I spoke must have told him I wasn't joking.

The name "Hafuri" had to only exist in his head at this point.

Hishigami Shikimi spoke fiercely down from the tree.

"See? Didn't we tell you there was an assassination plot in the works?"

"Honestly, when you take naivety this far, it almost becomes an art form. It took a visitor from the future before you actually accepted your death is coming."

"…"

Even as the other two spoke noisily around him, Majina remained silent for a while.

Even if they were hostile to him and even if they were clearly after his life, he may still have seen the people plotting against him as being "one of his own".

Finally, he spoke as if to shake it all off.

"Thank you."

I had no idea how to respond.

I couldn't even decide if I had really done the "right" thing or not.

"But you didn't come all this way just to tell me that, did you? Why did you come here?"

Most likely, this prophecy of the fall of Hyakki Yakou's leaders was beyond unexpected for them, but Majina, Ohatsu, and Hishigami Shikimi did not seem particularly shaken. Neither did the Aburatori.

Did that mean they really were a single group and none of them was deceiving any of the others?

And…

"…?"

“What is it?”

As I looked around in confusion, Majina spoke to me in a puzzled voice.

I could not touch or use things, so I couldn’t use a cellphone. It was very inconvenient.

And so I didn’t know what time it was.

I thought a fair amount of time had passed since I had arrived here. Nagisa would return home for lunch and Shinobu would head out at the same time, but what had happened today? Had he not visited this place for once?

Things were leaving the normal routine.

Even if it was a minor difference, it still filled my chest with unease.

Yes.

I had only one point of view and I couldn’t rewind.

Had I missed some decisive moment?

“Sorry.”

“?”

“Sorry! I have to go check on something!! We can talk more later! Bye!”

My impatience grew to worry, my worry grew to fear, and my fear grew to panic.

Did I even have a body here? Did I really need to move my legs? I didn’t know, but I still ran as fast as my legs would carry me.

I didn’t see Shinobu on the way back, so I ran straight back to the thatch-roof house.

As soon as I approached, a ripple-like omen reached me.

A few Youkai were gathered in the large yard and chatting.

One was a Hitotsume-Kozou, one was a Dorotabou, and one was a Yagyou-san.

“Mh. There seems to be a commotion inside.”

“I wonder where Shinobu-chan went…”

“Hmm. I was hoping to beg for some lunch, but it looks like today might not be the best day.”

It grew and grew and grew.

The pressure inside me grew past the limit. To reduce the overwhelmingly bad feeling as much as possible, I tried to gather as much information as I could. I didn’t bother opening the front door. I stuck my head right through.

Inside, my pale-faced mom was speaking into the house’s cordless phone receiver.

The growing pressure inside me burst.

“Yes, yes, yes! As I already told you, we’ve been receiving threatening letters for a while now. Yes, and today we received a photograph of Shinobu sent from an unknown address. It asked for a bottle of Jinnai Amaterasu Dedication sake to be sent through a specified method. …What are we supposed to do? We…ahhh!!”

……
……*I screwed up.*

That was what I honestly thought.

I had misread the heart of the entire incident. It hadn’t had anything to do with the Zashiki Warashi, the Jinnai house, the Aburatori, or Hyakki Yakou. And I had definitely seen hints of it.

The Jinnai Brewery made Japan’s…no, the world’s highest quality Japanese sake that *large criminal organizations* needed for their ceremonies. And I knew they were willing to kidnap family members to get it.

They had kidnapped Shinobu.

And hadn’t the attacker the day before said he had meant to target Shinobu but had shifted to Hayabusa because of all the Youkai? Shinobu had been a target from the beginning.

But I couldn’t make a mistake here. I was here to see the truth of the “Aburatori Incident”. That meant anything else was only the trigger.

And a trigger like this did make some sense.

At the very least, the Aburatori was not someone who randomly hurt people. I didn’t know what caused it to fail, but he was still stable at this point. It hadn’t seemed right to think of him as the villain here.

But what if this trigger were pulled?

The Aburatori had even asked those experts to kill him if the alternative was him killing another child, what if he learned that the child he had tried to protect at the cost of his own life had just been kidnapped? He held the cruelest killing techniques in his hands, so what if he thought to use them to their fullest to counterattack and rescue Shinobu?

He would do it.

It did not matter if it meant the failure of the Kaeshigami that had required the miraculous combination of resisting for nearly nine years and gaining the cooperation of Hyakki Yakou.

It did not matter if that could lead to a hopeless future in which he was eliminated by Hyakki Yakou as the most dangerous of deadly Youkai.

He had been prepared to give up his life in the first place.

He had no reason to hesitate here.

“…What?”

But…

But that meant…!!

“No one was deceiving anyone. Nothing failed. Was he…was the Aburatori really just a normal Youkai who wanted to rid himself of his murderous trait!?”

I didn’t know what was “right”, but I couldn’t just throw away any chance we might have by letting things continue like this.

I turned right around and ran out of the thatch-roof house.

The Youkai hiding on the farm road, in the dry paddy fields, and in the waterways were whispering to each other.

“I am a Nurikabe. Has anyone seen Shinobu-chan?”

“He was kidnapped. The human world is so scary. Even us Tengu have stopped spiriting people away.”

“Those damn villains. If I only knew where they were hiding, I’d give them a taste of the hammer of justice.”

If they were talking about it, the information had to have spread quite a bit. It was only a matter of time before it reached the Aburatori in the mountains.

When I ran to that elevated clearing, I found someone unexpected there: Nagisa with her large St. Bernard.

She was shouting more at the Aburatori who stood in front of the rotting cabin than she was at Majina or Hishigami Shikimi.

“P-please save Shinobu-chan!! We need your help!!”

“…”

She handed him a photo of young Shinobu that had likely been printed on a home printer.

“Even my dog’s nose can’t find him. I asked the other Youkai, but they said they don’t know where he is! S-so you’re the only one left. I don’t care who; I just want as many people searching for Shinobu-chan as I can get! So you help too! To save Shinobu-chan!!”

“…”

“I-I know an Aburatori is a scary Youkai. I know you mix up everything in our stomachs and eat it…”

Nagisa lay down on the underbrush covering the ground and spread her arms.

She squeezed her eyes shut and continued shouting.

“But then…you can eat everything in my stomach! I’ll do anything if you’ll help us save Shinobu-chan! So please save him!!”

Her argument didn’t really make sense.

There was no guarantee that Shinobu could be saved with the Aburatori’s help and you could hardly expect a Youkai that eats kid’s organs to keep his promise after giving him your own organs.

But this must have been the conclusion that her childish mind reached through a variety of strange connections.

He was a symbol of madness and death.

He stood in the place closest to vivid reds and blacks.

He stood at the entrance to all of the world’s darkness.

That may have been what the Aburatori looked like to Nagisa. She may have thought anyone who had fallen into the darkness had to obey the will of this gatekeeper, so she may have thought he would save Shinobu’s life from that dark abyss if she gave her own life to this Youkai.

“I see…”

This worst of the deadly Youkai picked up on that.

Rather than focusing on the actions themselves, he understood the human feelings that led to those actions.

“Then I will take one thing from your body.”

I thought I heard a trigger being pulled.

“I only need to take your tears. You must promise me that you will stop crying if I bring this Shinobu back.”

I felt like everything had returned to the proper rails.

This seemed to be snowballing toward the worst possible ending. Everything they had built up was coming tumbling down and failing. I knew that, but I still felt like this was “right”.

Or to put it more simply, I thought he looked cool.

“Can you promise me that?”

“Eh? Um…yes. But is that all you want? I mean…”

“I could not ask for anything more.”

I heard the sound of scraping metal.

The next thing I knew, he had a few dozen skewers spread out in his hands like fans.

“Thank you. I may not have been able to bring this to its conclusion, but I do appreciate the help you gave.”

Ohatsu the Sunekosuri (female) let out a heavy sigh.

“…Are you really going?”

“I have no real reason not to.”

It was a short answer and this time Hishigami Shikimi, the giant flower in the tree, laughed and spoke.

“Oh? Even though it means wasting your efforts of the past nine years? No matter the reason, the seal will be easily broken once you recall the flavor of killing.”

“An optimum answer that requires letting a six-year-old boy die scares me even more. I can only call that properly insane.”

Again, it was a short answer.

Finally, Hyakki Yakou Leader Majina spoke.

“I might not look it, but I am fairly upset about this. I could use Hyakki Yakou’s power to hunt them down. You do not necessarily have to use your power.”

“You will ‘eventually’ find them and defeat them ‘somewhere’. But will you make it in time for Jinnai Shinobu? I am a monster among monsters. I understand all too well how my fellow child-killers and kidnappers think. The best method of arriving in time is for me to use…no, to recall my skills.”

Majina fell silent.

Finally, he brought a hand to his forehead while leaning against a nearby tree to clear the way for the Youkai. Anguish seeped out from behind his monocle and he tore at his bangs as he forced out a low voice.

“…That’s too bad.”

“Once I recall the taste of blood, I leave the rest to you. The Kaeshigami will completely fail and there will be no other way of saving me. So please use the essence of Hyakki Yakou to kill me. Before I lay my hands on anyone.”

“Aburatori.”

“Also…”

With his face hidden behind his large hat, the Youkai formed a ferocious grin.

He was saying farewell to this world without a single complaint.

“You said you are fairly upset about this. Well, I am downright livid.”

I heard a buzzing sound much like a monitor powering on.

Old charms appeared all over his body. They appeared on his hat, his clothes, and his skin. All of those charms formed some kind of seal, but a bluish-white

phosphorescence burned through them and destroyed them. He had broken free of his limiter.

He was at full power once more.

He simply appeared, simply abducted, and simply killed.

He was an empty husk of a legend that lacked the traditions of fear.

When he used his power, he broke through the three-dimensional restrictions and vanished in an instant.

The hunter was finally on the move.

Part 9

Just before the Aburatori vanished, I grabbed his shoulder.

I hadn't had a real goal in mind. I simply felt like I needed to see all of this for myself.

Thanks to that, I successfully hitched a ride with him.

It may have been similar to teleportation.

First, the Aburatori appeared at a completely normal farm road.

"What would I do? While it is cutting edge, this is essentially an insular village society. Unlike a metropolis, there are no crowds of unfamiliar people walking around. A suspicious person wandering around and searching for someone to abduct would stand out too much. Then what method would they choose? Tire tracks…?"

Next, he appeared at an intersection and looked around.

"Scouting out the terrain, learning the target's routine, going over the actual method of kidnapping, and a practice run. They would need to stay in the Intellectual Village for quite a while, but I doubt they would use a lodging facility like an inn. So maybe a large vehicle that doubles as transportation and lodging. What vehicle would be able to drive around the village irregularly without rousing suspicions?"

Then he stood in front of a vending machine.

"The Intellectual Village is meant to look remote, so they generally use online shopping. But it wouldn't be a deliveryman. In rural areas, they only arrive at set times, so a truck driving around irregularly would stand out. …Then an electronics worker? An internet provider truck that performs maintenance and inspections on fiber-optic and high-speed wireless lines does not have a set route. No one would suspect them if they drove back and forth a lot. This old vending machine has been used a lot. It isn't often you see one with soba and udon. It would have been a convenient source of food without anyone noticing.

He wasn't so much a hound as he was a precision guided missile.

As the Aburatori grew ever closer to the answer, I could feel an ominous, heavy, sticky, and deadly aura coming from his entire body.

Something he had worked so hard to build up was being definitively corrupted.

And…

"*Found them.*"

It had not even taken ten…no, five minutes.

Not even the adults and paranormal Youkai had been able to find this kidnapper. With young Shinobu inside, an electric truck was driving around at irregular intervals to make sure no one suspected it. It was disguised as an ISP truck and the windows to the back were covered in metal plates.

A torrent of murderous intent had been radiating from the Aburatori, but as soon as he located that target, a clear directionality came over it.

That dark emotion became an invisible spear and accurately pierced through the van.

It had likely been over before it even began.

Before the Aburatori actually made his attack, the soldiers of *a large criminal organization* after the top quality Jinnai sake were bound like a frog being glared at by a snake.

But even so, the Aburatori kicked the van from the side.

The front half of the metal vehicle instantly tore open like a box of candy and shot out into the paddy field.

That violence was so impressive it almost felt refreshing.

The flow of time briefly seemed to stop.

The Aburatori silently glared into the van.

"Wha-…?" said someone in the back seat.

There were three assassins left and one of them had a hand on Shinobu's shoulder. But before the flow of time could return, the Aburatori's hands moved in a flash.

A total of over one hundred metal skewers were released from his hands and filled the cramped van. The storm of steel covered every inch of the van except for the space taken up by Shinobu's small body.

It all happened too quickly for any screams or shouts to tear through the world.

The Aburatori rushed into the van, grabbed Shinobu's collar, kicked open the van's back door, and burst out like a shell.

"Wah, wah!?"

Shinobu did not seem nervous as he was lowered onto the farm road. He did not appear to have been crying either, so it was possible he hadn't even been aware he had been kidnapped.

"Wait here."

That was all the Aburatori said before approaching the van (Part B) that had finally come to a stop after rolling along.

“U-uuh…”

A single man groaned as he crawled out, but the Aburatori grabbed his collar and lifted him with one arm. He then slammed the man’s back against the ceiling of the van that lay on its side.

“Ubh! Cough, cough!! Gahh!!”

“Lend me your phone. I wish to speak with your boss.”

“Pant, pant. D-do you really think I’ll let you do that?”

“So you will remain loyal to the end? How old-fashioned of you.”

That monster dragged his enemy behind the van where Shinobu could not see and spoke with quiet smile poking out from below his large hat.

“By the way, do you know what it is my skewer is stabbing into? Do you know what this flabby dark red thing is?”

“Ah…ah…ahhh…”

“My specialty is children, but I still wouldn’t recommend upsetting me too much, youngster.”

“Aaaaahhh!? Wh-what…what organ is that!?”

Removing it had not killed him.

So was it his appendix, a kidney, or a piece of the highly regenerative liver?

Whatever the case, seeing it in front of your eyes was probably enough to piss yourself.

“I understand not wanting to lose a finger, but you should look after your insides as well.”

“Ah…ahh…ahhhhh!?”

“Now, let’s try this once more: Lend me your phone. I wish to speak with your boss. …Surely you aren’t going to be foolish enough to say you don’t know how many organs you hold inside you. If that’s the case, I don’t mind removing them one at a time to educate you.”

“O-okay! Okay!!”

The Aburatori pulled a cellphone from the soldier’s pocket, opened the address book and called one of the numbers there.

His first words were blunt.

“Your men have failed.”

“…”

“Wash your hands of this before the wound grows even worse. I am a Youkai and a deadly one at that. I have no concept of lifespan. …I am watching you at all times, forever. If you try to take revenge, I will immediately bring twice the damage to you.”

“Did you think you could threaten the Comfort Association just because you don’t die? We eat violence and fear for breakfast. Just like a sushi chef can’t afford to lose to an amateur in cooking skill, we cannot afford to withdraw in our own field of expertise.”

“Is that so? To be honest, I have no interest in the quantity and quality of your paranormal experts. But can you truly trust in the power of someone else in your organization if it is your own child’s life on the line?”

“You…”

“Didn’t I tell you? I am a Youkai and a deadly one at that. If you need a further hint, I am the cruelest of the cruel in the field of kidnapping and child-killing. You can hide your child overseas or on the other side of Mars if you want; I will still find them and kill them. I know some tricks to slip past the condition preventing Youkai from leaving this country. This is no different from you targeting a child to threaten Jinnai.”

“…”

“No matter how many children you make, legitimate or otherwise, and no matter how many children you adopt, I will kill every last one of them. People often say they will curse someone to the very last generation of their family line, but I will make *your* generation the end of your line. …Now, what will you do? Will I be removing your entire clan’s organs or will you wash your hands of this so your family can survive? Choose whichever path you like. Nothing in this world could be more frightening than being haunted by an Aburatori.”

“Don’t think you’ll ever get a moment’s rest, you damn Youkai.”

“I suppose you would have to threaten me here, but that establishes our contract. … Let me reiterate: I am always watching you. If you approach Jinnai in any way, shape, or form, I will apply my punishment. It will not be you but your adorable children who die. It only takes one mistake. Keep that in mind and live on in fear.”

The Aburatori did not bother hanging up.

He threw the phone to the ground and coldly crushed it below his heel.

“Ah…ahh…”

That sequence of violence had been so vivid that I had been entranced.

It was perfect. Even after producing the perfect result, he stood still in the cold wind.

His body wobbled.

I immediately heard a bizarre noise.

It was like cracks running through a plastic board. The chorus of cracking continued without end and a definite but invisible change came over the Aburatori.

Once he recalled the flavor of blood, he could not go back.

Just as expected, the fall had come.

“Ahh…”

As he wobbled on his feet, he accidentally moved from behind the sliced van.

He entered Shinobu’s field of vision.

Shinobu did not understand what was going on. Not a single bit of it. So when he saw the Aburatori sweating profusely and trying to bear with the pain, he ran over.

“What is it? Are you okay? Do you have a stomachache!?”

Immediately, I felt like the Aburatori’s pulse reached my ears.

An unpleasant sound continued as the Aburatori’s teeth chattered. But this was not due to the fear of Shinobu possibly having seen the aftermath of his brutality. He was desperately trying to hold back.

He was holding back his functionality as the Aburatori.

He was holding back that system built to kill children.

He had recalled the flavor of blood and he was using his intellect and reason to desperately restrain the urge to devour his proper target.

But that must not have lasted long.

“…!!!!!!”

A great sound burst out.

The next thing I knew, the Aburatori was gone. Left all alone, Shinobu looked worried and the sounds of police sirens belatedly approached.

The Aburatori had finally been released.

He simply appeared, simply abducted, and simply killed.

He was the worst of the deadly Youkai who did nothing more than that.

Part 10

“Oh, Tengu. Have you heard about ?”

“Just some rumors. But just hearing the name makes me feel sick. He definitely brings down the overall definition of . It’s not often you see a version that’s so specialized in killing and nothing else.”

“He’s shown up.”

“This is gonna be rough. A lot of are going to die again.”

“But it’s not like we can do anything about it. He exists as a that’s been cut free of the simple hierarchy of power.”

“The Aburatori, hm?”

Part 11

Since he was six years old, Shinobu wasn’t brought to the police station in the neighboring town. Instead, the police came to the thatch-roof house.

Meanwhile, the growing group of Youkai out front was going nuts.

An Aburatori had shown up.

Lots of children were going to die again.

If you didn’t know the circumstances, that was how it would look. The Aburatori was trying to escape that situation and had saved Shinobu even though it meant throwing away his one and only chance, but no one else knew about that.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Shinobu? You don’t hurt anywhere?”

“I’m fine. I just need to drink some of the fizzy stuff.”

Shinobu waved at my mom and seemed more interested in the rumors about the Aburatori than he did in what had happened to him.

It was past evening by the time the police left, but they hadn’t been able to ask much out of concern for Shinobu.

And…

“Rumor has it Hyakki Yakou is going to act.”

“Then I guess we don’t have to worry. They scare me, but I doubt they would fail to kill the Youkai in their crosshairs. This should all settle down if they kill the Aburatori.”

“Really, we just need to make sure we aren’t caught in the crossfire.”

“That’s true. I’d rather not get killed by the punishment meant for the Aburatori.”

Shinobu gave a troubled frown.

He tugged at my grampa’s clothes and asked a question.

“Grampa, what’s the Aburatori?”

“Hm? Nothing you need to know about.”

For once, the old man bluntly cut off all conversation, so Shinbou asked my gramma instead.

“Gramma, tell me about the Aburatori.”

“That is an extremely scary Youkai. Word has it one has been seen around here recently. You need to stay away from it.”

“…”

He looked up at the Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata.

The sexy Youkai simply shook her head with a grim look on her face.

However, this was the end of it.

The Kaeshigami plan was the only way for the Aburatori to walk down the proper path, but it had utterly failed. He was about to go on a rampage, so Hyakki Yakou’s Majina and Hishigami Shikimi would destroy him as he had asked. Nothing would remain, just as they had arranged in advance. Out of concern for Shinobu’s future, that Youkai had saved him and would vanish without ever telling anyone the truth.

…Except that couldn’t be what happened.

This was still just the trigger. I already knew the worst possible ending was coming.

When Shinobu returned to his room that day, the adults and Youkai left him alone. He had been abducted by soldiers of *a large criminal organization* to influence the adults, so none of them knew what was right or how to approach the situation.

However, that completely backfired.

Shinobu wasn’t the type to hole up in his room when he was in a state of shock. Of all things, he pulled a backpack from the closet and began filling it with a map, a flashlight, and other tools.

He looked like he was about to head out.

He was going to leave this safe home after everything that had happened to him.

Just like a child creating a secret base, nothing he packed seemed particularly useful.

It looked like he was packing up everything he could find, from crayons to snacks.

And one of those items was a piece of construction paper.

It was covered in scribbles from crayons and colored pencils, but it probably had great meaning to Shinobu.

There were humanoid figures drawn there. There were animal-like figures drawn there. What had long been seen as a product of a runaway imagination was drawn there. The one with black hair and red clothing may have been the Zashiki Warashi. Something was colored over with circles of black crayon, but I had no idea what it was.

The countless figures formed a circle and something was sloppily written above their heads: We’re All Friends.

That was all.

But no matter how silly and useless that was, young Shinobu may have seen it as indispensable when his life was on the line.

And my current self was no different.

I had solved quite a few Package-related incidents and I had run across some extraordinary monsters in the process. With the Aburatori and the Aoandon, they had far surpassed the realm of what humans could handle.

But even so, wasn't this something I couldn't afford to forget?

"I can't stop to figure this out."

He packed up all sorts of things that probably wouldn't be of much use.

"I can't sit here crying."

He forcibly fastened the backpack's snap.

"I have to save my Friend Youkai."

He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand just once.

He faced forward and spoke aloud, as if to fight back against everything that was saying such cruel things.

"The Aburatori is all alone now, so it's my turn to save him."

"……
……"

Why?

How could it have turned out like this? I thought.

I could take a pretty good guess what was going to happen now.

Before Hyakki Yakou could slay the rampaging Aburatori, restless Shinobu would run across that worst of the deadly Youkai. Something would happen there and the Zashiki Warashi would use her Ver. 39. That was how this was going to turn out.

But while the Aburatori had been foolish, he had done nothing wrong. While Hyakki Yakou had been cruel to let him go, that decision had been kind. While Shinobu knew nothing of what was happening, his decision was wiser than anyone else's.

Yet like it all was being swallowed up by some great pit of doom, each act of good will or kindness was leading to the expected worst possible ending.

Who had been in the wrong?

Couldn't it have all ended with the defeat of the *large criminal organization*? Couldn't that have been the nice happy ending?

"Nn."

Shinobu put on the overfilled backpack and snuck out of his room. A small child tiptoeing around would normally have been noticed right away, but he happened to slip past everyone's field of vision. It was almost like fate was giving him a helping hand.

It could only follow him.

I could only watch as that awful conclusion approached.

Young Shinobu ran through the orange-dyed paddy fields. He innocently believed he could save the Aburatori. I knew everything had failed, but I still wished that miracle could actually happen.

But it wouldn't.

That kind conclusion could never, ever happen.

After all, the ending was already decided. I was only peeking at the predetermined past. This was not the present where countless options danced before my eyes or the future where everything was an unclear mass of chaos. This was the past where everything followed just the one path.

So we reached that mountain clearing filled with underbrush. The canopy of tree branches and the dark, rotting cabin came into view.

And there, young Shinobu saw it

He saw the Aburatori whose entire body was torn to pieces and whose breathing was so shallow it seemed on the verge of stopping.

His blood was closer to black than red.

Unable to stand, he had collapsed to the ground and had his back against the cabin's wall.

He looked like a broken doll.

Shinobu could no longer form words.

He released a scream that only amounted to sound and ran straight toward the Aburatori.

"Oops."

I heard Hishigami Shikimi's voice from the trees and looked up to see the giant flower of her white hair.

She was no longer empty-handed. Her hands were stuck into her kimono's pockets and she was clearly holding something.

"What should we do, Majina!? My specialty is war, so I can't aim quite so accurately!!"

"My, my. This isn't good. Hold off for the time being, Shikimi-san."

I saw a black whirlwind and then Hyakki Yakou's leader was standing in the center of the underbrush. Like a pet-lover, he held Ohatsu the (female) Sunekosuri in his arms. The small canine Youkai had a scarf around her neck and a ribbon on her right ear.

What?

Did that black whirlwind just gather together!? Did it turn into that (female) Sunekosuri!?

"Now, let me pass that question right along. …Aburatori, what do you intend to do?"

It was unclear just how much life that Youkai had remaining, but he seemed to hesitate for just a moment.

"I made up my mind from the beginning. I told you to take care of this, Hyakki Yakou!!"

"You can't!!"

Shinobu's shout interrupted, but it was not directed at the Aburatori. He turned his back on that worst of the deadly Youkai and spread his arms to protect his friend from Majina and Hishigami Shikimi.

"Don't be mean to the Aburatori!! If you're going to hurt him, then you have to get through me first!!"

An obvious click of the tongue came from the trees.

Monocled Majina spoke bitterly while holding the (female) Sunekosuri.

But he spoke to the Youkai behind Shinobu, not to the young boy himself.

"Let me ask again: what do you wish to do?"

"!?"

"The optimal answer is not always the best answer. I don't mind if you ask for something other than death despite knowing that would be wrong."

"How could I possibly ask for that?" spat out the Youkai while exhaling weakly below his large hat. "Even now, I am taking aim to tear into this boy's back!! How can I let this continue!? How can I let this evil remain!? Kill me, Hyakki Yakou. Kill meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

Most likely, they had all been living on the very edge.

They had all been worried about someone else, put themselves second, and tried to protect something.

And in this extreme situation, Hyakki Yakou's leader accepted someone's wishes.

"…What are you going to do?"

"Fine, then. If that is what he truly wishes, then I will take on the thankless role."

He may have wanted to hear a different answer.

As wrong as it would have been, he may have wanted to hear the Youkai say he wanted to live and to be happy.

But that opportunity had been lost.

So Majina gently placed his index finger on Ohatsu's forehead. That was all it took for the small canine Youkai to turn into deep darkness. With a deafening noise, the man's body began to vanish into the scenery once more.

But just before he did, another great noise reached my ears.

It was the sound of a Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata kicking Majina's torso with all her might.

The blow may have been on the level of a full-speed collision from a car.

After the shockwave-like noise, the young man's body flew into the forest. He broke through two or three fairly thick trees and the line of destruction finally came to a stop at a large tree trunk further in.

But that was not the end of the motion.

I heard a rustling sound.

The darkness vanished, the small dog reappeared, and Majina stood at the center of the destruction as if nothing had happened.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"I'm not here for you," spat out the Zashiki Warashi.

She paid no heed to the Hyakki Yakou leader who was walking toward her.

She was focused on a single point with a branch cutter resting on her shoulder, perhaps to take the place of a machete.

"What do you want to do, Shinobu?"

"Nn."

"What the adults want doesn't matter. You don't have to think about the rules between humans and Youkai. What do you want to do right here and now?"

There may not have been a "right" answer.

It may have been that no one could come up with anything like that.

But Shinobu answered without a moment's hesitation.

"*I'll save my friend.*"

"I see."

With a thin smile, the Zashiki Warashi spun around the branch cutter resting on her shoulder.

She forcefully struck the ground with the bottom to threaten everyone around her.

“If you know that, then go do it. …You’re a boy, aren’t you?”

“Okay! Let’s go, Aburatori!! Come with me!!”

Shinobu grabbed the hand of the Aburatori who looked on the verge of collapse. The two of them ran off into the woods.

Finally, the Zashiki Warashi faced Majina.

She held out the blade to form a barrier against anyone who would pursue those two.

“Now, now. To be honest, I’m thankful,” said Hyakki Yakou Leader Majina in a somehow sad tone. “After all, this conclusion is far too empty. It may be the optimal answer based on pre-established harmony, but there isn’t any salvation to it. It might be inappropriate to say this turn of events excites me, but that’s honestly how I feel.”

Majina pressed his finger against the forehead of the small canine Youkai he held in his arm.

I had a feeling I understood this.

The Sunekosuri was a Youkai that rubbed its cheek against travelers’ legs. That alone sounded harmless and adorable, but it was based on the fear something hiding in the underbrush when walking at night.

Majina had said his name was spelled with the character for “curse” and that was highly appropriate.

A Youkai was a physical manifestation of certain thoughts or feelings, but he could break them down into their original phenomena and mysteries and use them like that.

This went far beyond a Package that took dozens or hundreds of people to take advantage of just a portion of a Youkai’s traits. He alone was breaking down, analyzing, reconstructing, and reusing the entire blueprint or diagram of a Youkai… and he was doing it all perfectly.

Even the most harmless and adorable Youkai had its base ideology extracted, weaponized, and remade into a tool of war.

This was the man who ruled at the top of Hyakki Yakou.

Even if he acted like nothing special, I should have known that wouldn’t be the case!

“But there is more to this than that. I am not so irresponsible that I would leave the conclusion in someone else’s hands. I am the leader of Japan’s greatest occult organization. Or will you twist the destiny of our confrontation with the power of the Ver. 39?”

“Sorry, but neither of us is the star here. As side characters, how about we keep our dance to the corner of the stage so we don’t get in the way?”

“I have to ask. Shinobu-kun is one thing, but why are you personally so intent on saving the Aburatori? You know what will happen in a direct confrontation here, don’t you?”

“To be honest, that doesn’t matter.”

The branch cutter whistled through the wind like a spear.

“But Shinobu decided to walk with even the worst of the deadly Youkai, so I’ll believe in him. I’ll believe in the boy who immediately made the decision you could only dream of making.”

I was confronted with two different choices.

The first was of course pursuing Shinobu and the Aburatori. That was the heart of this incident and leaving them alone together was far too dangerous. Even if he didn’t want to, the Aburatori might kill Shinobu.

The second was to stay here and watch the Zashiki Warashi and Hyakki Yakou’s fight to the death. Shinobu and the Aburatori were a problem, but the Zashiki Warashi’s strange Ver. 39 power was another crucial point. Resolving this before she used it and thus saving it for use against the Aoandon’s group in the “present” was the most important part of this.

“Which one…”

I looked all around.

I had only one point of view and I couldn’t rewind.

“Which one am I supposed to choose!?”

Part 12

I ran with all my might through the eerily rustling forest.

I had ultimately chosen Shinobu and the Aburatori.

The conclusion was approaching fast. I no longer thought there was some further truth or malice hidden here. I knew that, but I still felt uneasy. If I made a single mistake and overlooked the decisive moment, this would all be for nothing.

I found them right away.

“This way! This way! I don’t really know why, but this way!!”

“Wait… Please wait!”

As Shinobu ran through the underbrush, the Aburatori gently pulled his hand from the boy’s grasp and forced out the words as if coughing up blood.

Without noticing the danger, Shinobu ran over to him.

“What is it? Do your injuries hurt!? D-don’t worry. I brought some bandaids for this!!”

“No, not that…”

The Aburatori continued speaking while his teeth chattered.

He looked disturbingly close to stabbing his prey with the skewers and pulling out the boy’s organs.

“You need to run away… You need to leave this place at once!!”

“No! I can’t leave you, Aburatori. You’re coming with me!!”

“That is not what I am talking about!!”

Shinobu’s small shoulders shook when the Youkai shouted back at him.

The Aburatori trembled at the fact that he had hurt the boy, but he could not afford to be kind anymore. He sent more filthy words out toward Shinobu.

“I…I’m saying that…*I* will end up killing you! Why can’t you understand something so simple!? I am not your friend. You are nothing but a convenient prey to me!! I will derive perverse pleasure from pulling out your organs, skewering them, cooking them, and removing the oil!! That is the kind of repulsive monster I am!!”

“No, you aren’t.”

“That’s why I’m telling you to run. Run from this worst of the deadly Youkai!! I simply appear, simply abduct, and simply kill! That is all I can do!!”

“That isn’t who you are! The policemen told me I was taken away by bad guys and someone saved me! So I know you aren’t a bad guy!!”

“Hurry…hurry…run away…”

“I don’t care what anyone says. I don’t care what you say.”

“Ruuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuun!!”

“You’re my friend!! That will never change!!!!!”

He couldn’t resist any longer.

I heard the sound of the Aburatori’s back teeth cracking in his mouth and then countless metal skewers appeared in his hands.

Once they were released, Shinobu would be completely helpless.

But that never happened.

A white shadow suddenly dropped down from above.

Hishigami Shikimi used the three-pronged vajra she held to knock down the skewers like a bolt of lightning.

How exactly had she done it?

I was watching the entire time, but my understanding couldn't keep up. A three-pronged vajra was a weapon used by Buddhist monks…or was it called a Buddhist instrument? Basically, it had sharp spikes on either end and you held it in your fist at the center. The only usable portions stuck out from the ends by her thumb and little finger, so how had she knocked down dozens of metal skewers with just that?

She let down her long white hair, let the kimono fall from her shoulders, and revealed the undershirt below. The scent of incense filled the area.

Shikimi sounded exasperated with her own actions.

"Honestly, you're really making me act out of character here. To think a Hishigami woman would act to protect someone!!"

"Hishigami…Shikimi!?" said the Aburatori.

"Yes. Just to be clear, I'm not here to kill you. I'm well, well aware this isn't something a battle-obsessed war specialist should be saying, but I too am sick of *that sort of thing*!!"

As the threat of tension vanished, the Aburatori launched dozens if not over a hundred skewers.

However, Hishigami Shikimi used (what looked like) a single swing of her arm to deflect them all on her three-pronged vajra. Not a single one made it to Shinobu behind her.

"This is no time to be holding back, Hishigami! Kill me!!"

"I can't help it. If I went all out, I could easily destroy this entire village…not to mention this kid." She grinned. "More importantly, I too am only a side character. I may not be used to fighting a defensive battle, but I only have to buy some time for her to arrive and persuade her foolish master."

"What…?"

"She's coming. Prepare yourself."

As soon as the white-haired girl said that, a single figure ran between the countless trees and out from a thicket.

The Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata charged toward the Aburatori with the branch cutter at the ready.

The Aburatori already had his hands full with Hishigami Shikimi, so this completely surpassed the limits of his processing power.

He was unable to deal with the Zashiki Warashi as she charged in from the side, so she easily collided with him. They rolled along the ground together, moving away from Shinobu. They slid down the mountain slope.

“Why must you all ignore my wishes!?”

“I don’t like it, but there is one way of saving you! I just have to join forces with them!!” shouted the Zashiki Warashi at close range. “You are a Youkai that kills children and you were born into this world because the humans wanted you to do that and only that. No stabilizing method, restraints, or paranormal technique can stop you from killing children! No matter what!”

“That!! That is why I am telling you to kill me!! Before I lay a hand on that boy!!”

“But have you forgotten? Just as you’re a symbol of the perpetrator, I’m a symbol of the victim!”

They shouted at each other from point black range.

“The Zashiki Warashi is a collection of the children killed during famines. You could say I’m a concentrated symbol of the deaths of children. We are the perpetrator and victim. If the two of us are paranormally linked much like a Package, you can artificially and symbolically feel the deaths of children without end. Just like inflating a medical balloon in the stomach can make one forget their hunger, you will never feel the urge to kill!!”

“…!!”

With that single hope in mind, the Aburatori’s head seemed to be reeling on the ground.

But…

“How exactly will you create that link? And do you have time!? Even if it is just a Package, you have no idea how long it will take to assemble from the ground up!!”

“Normally, yes. But have you forgotten about the extreme exception to that rule?”

“You don’t mean…”

“Majina, leader of Hyakki Yakou. He can instantly break down any Youkai to their base phenomena and mysteries. He should be able to assemble a simple Package in a matter of seconds.”

Once she said that, the Aburatori came to a complete stop.

That worst of the deadly Youkai spoke as if slowly exhaling.

“You mean…I don’t need to be killed?”

“Yes.”

“I can get rid myself of that deadly trait without being killed?”

“Technically, you won’t lose the trait. It will be caught in a harmless infinite loop.”

“…”

“You don’t need to kill anyone and no one needs to kill you,” said the Zashiki Warashi while gently loosening her grip as she pinned to the ground. “You can remain Shinobu’s friend. Just like all the other Youkai.”

The Aburatori remained silent for a while.

His mind may have gone completely blank.

“Nee-chan…” said a quiet voice.

Everything was finally settling down, so the Zashiki Warashi breathed a sigh of relief and slowly turned her head. She looked to Shinobu and gently narrowed her eyes.

“It’s okay, Shinobu. You don’t need to worry about anything. I’ll settle everything for you.”

This was the end.

It was the ultimate happy end where no one had to die.

But was it really?

Wasn’t I supposed to be seeing a failed incident in the past?

The fall began with a very, very small sound.

“Ah.”

The Zashiki Warashi had forgotten. She had logically convinced the Aburatori, so she had completely forgotten.

His killing techniques worked on a level beyond his own will.

The instant she turned toward Shinobu while pinning the deadly Youkai to the ground, his arm moved against his own will.

A single skewer stabbed into the center of her body, as if tearing through her ample chest.

That deadly weapon would tear out one’s organs, skewer them, cook them over a fire, and remove the oil.

“Ahh…”

She looked surprised and her upper body slid to the side.

She crumpled weakly to the ground like a marionette with its strings cut.

“Ahhhh

Shinobu’s scream and my own overlapped perfectly.

The Zashiki Warashi was not a normal human. She was a collection of the children killed during famines and the like, so it was possible a skewer meant to kill a single child would not kill her. It was possible this would not entirely destroy her.

But young Shinobu did not understand Youkai or Packages, so he didn’t understand that.

I heard him crying.

He was not trying to suppress it. He opened his mouth wide and his young voice wailed like a siren. That shrill cry lingered in one’s head and was likely the last thing anyone there wanted to hear.

It sounded like an expression of unbearable despair.

I felt as if I had finally arrived at the end of this incident.

Young Shinobu, my past self, felt despair.

But not over the fear of what would happen to him. And not from the shock of seeing the Zashiki Warashi harmed. If that was enough to fill him with despair, this would have already happened when he was kidnapped by the *large criminal organization.*

That was not what this was.

He was not the type to cry for himself.

He believed in the Youkai Stamp. He believed all Youkai were his friends. That sloppy writing on the construction paper had said it: We’re All Friends. Until that very moment, he had not viewed any human or Youkai as higher or lower, superior or inferior to another.

But this created a definitive dividing line.

There was now a split between enemy and ally.

He found himself wanting to save the Zashiki Warashi even if it meant abandoning the Aburatori.

He found himself mentally abandoning the Aburatori, a Youkai with a personality of his own.

That despair was the true damage of this incident.

So…

Part 13

A quiet voice could be heard somewhere in the twilit mountains.

“He’s crying…”

The number of voices grew like the leaves rustling in the wind. They gained enough intensity to shake the earth, as if the entire mountain were roaring.

“He’s crying…”

Except this was not limited to the mountain. It covered the paddy fields, the farm roads, the thatch-roof house, and the orange sky. Just as a single cigarette butt could spark a vast forest fire, the entire landscape was filled with the explosive deluge of voices.

Did anyone there understand that every one of those voices belonged to an enraged Youkai?

“Shinobu-chan is crying!!!!!!!”

“Hold on,” muttered Hishigami Shikimi with her white hair spread out and her kimono hanging down. “You’ve gotta be kidding. …This is more than just a hundred or a thousand. Is this kid outdoing the phenomenon of Hyakki Yakou with just his crying voice!?”

It sounded like a tremor in the earth.

Even an amateur like me could tell it was a passionate mob that had completely lost sight of its rationality. Were all of those Youkai going to respond to Shinobu’s cry by baring their fangs against the source?

What would happen to the Aburatori then?

“…I get it now.”

I hadn’t reached the depths of the despair just yet. This was still only the entrance.

Young Shinobu had abandoned the Aburatori to save the Zashiki Warashi.

And when he cried out, all of his friends had shown up.

He had given all of them the Youkai Stamp, making them his Friend Youkai. They were all going to bite, rip, and tear the Aburatori to pieces.

I recalled that construction paper.

Humans and Youkai had formed a smiling circle with “We’re All Friends” written at the top.

This gruesome conclusion was the exact opposite.

There was no way six-year-old Shinobu could bear to see this. It wasn’t an issue of his body. His heart would surely break. His heart would be torn to pieces and destroyed if he saw that.

“…Ah…kh…”

The collapsed Zashiki Warashi’s upper body moved a little.

The Aburatori’s attack may have damaged her bodily structure, but she was still trying to protect Shinobu who was about to be destroyed.

This had to be what she used her Ver. 39 to alter.

She used that single-use cheat code to protect his dream and to protect his heart.

Some bizarre static ran through my mind.

Dual images appeared before my eyes.

A voice from sometime in the past filled my mind.

“…Make…me…”

The voice was forced out through a throat that had been torn to shreds. It sounded like the Aburatori’s, but it contained a wet sound, like he was coughing up blood.

Even after all that, he must not have died.

His arms and legs had been torn off, his nose and ears had been ripped away, his eyes had been crushed, his teeth and tongue had been pulled out, his organs had been dragged out, his spine and pelvis had been removed, his body had been pumped full of venom and dissolved with acid, his nerves had been scorched with flames, his blood had been boiled, and his body was scattered everywhere, yet his soul had not been freed.

“Make me…a villain…”

That was his earnest desire.

“Whether I am good or evil, I will still kill the same number of children. My moral alignment has no bearing on the actions I take. No matter what future awaits me, I will kill the exact same number. Nothing can add to or subtract from that number, so it makes no difference. I at least want to retrieve Jinnai Shinobu’s heart. *I want him to think I deserved death.* Then the guilt will not crush the child. He will be able to return to his normal life with a smile on his face…”

Was that why?

Was that why I had felt such a discrepancy between the cruel Aburatori I had seen in the “present” and the conflicted one I had seen in the “past”?

This was the true ending.

Nothing more was hidden. I had seen the whole of that awful ending.

That left me with no more reason to hold back.

If I was going to change history and save everyone for a happy ending, I had to do it here!

With the sound of bursting fireworks, the sense of watching everything through a thin panel of glass vanished.

This time, I truly felt as if I had taken a step into the past.

“Stand up.”

I immediately grabbed the confused Aburatori's arm and forcibly pulled upwards.

"Stand up!! If you want to live!!"

There was no time. I chose the one remaining option available to me.

It could cause a time paradox, but I didn't care. I directly faced myself from ten years ago.

"Hey, can you hear me? Hey, you brat!!"

"Eh? What?"

"Listen. I'll fix everything here, but next time, don't you dare give up on someone you've decided is your friend. Got that?"

I didn't have time to wait for an answer.

I could feel the low rumbling approaching. It felt like the sign of a coming natural disaster, but it wasn't. A sea of Youkai was charging toward us, filling the entire surface of the earth. They were giving into their anger to tear apart the Aburatori that had caused Shinobu to cry.

I couldn't let them do that.

I couldn't let the Aburatori be killed, I couldn't let Shinobu's heart be destroyed, I couldn't let the Ver. 39 be used, and I couldn't let Shinobu's friends dirty their hands.

So with the Aburatori's hand in my grasp, I jumped down the mountain slope…no, I jumped off the cliff.

Even if it seemed different now, I was still in something of an out-of-body experience. My physical specs were clearly beyond those of a mere high school boy. I landed partway down the jagged slope and continued down at full speed, like I was skiing.

The sea of madness changed direction and continued toward us.

"What…what are you doing!? I cannot escape those Youkai no matter what I do. I don't know who you are, but you are only going to get yourself caught in the frenzy!!"

"Oh, is that so!? By the way, my name is Jinnai Shinobu! Nice to meet you!!"

"Wha-…eh? Jinnai…Shinobu?"

"Do you have a better idea of what's happening now? I'm here from the present! No, I guess from your perspective I'm from the future!! You might not be able to escape no matter where you run, but their venomous fangs can't reach you if you cross the barrier of time!! If you don't die, my past self won't fall into despair. I don't have time to explain the details, but that will solve everything!!"

"No…no!! You can't do that. If you throw me into an environment without the Zashiki Warashi's traits and Majina's skills, I will become an evil that continues its indiscriminate slaughter of children. I have already recalled the flavor of blood! I can't stop myself!! So please leave me here!!"

“To hell with that!!”

I jumped from rock to rock sticking out of the slope to continue downward. I felt like a snowboarder being pursued by an avalanche. If I slowed down, that torrent of death would swallow me up.

Was this still not enough?

Once I changed history, I was supposed to be automatically returned to the present!

“I’ve been watching everything you did! I know you don’t actually see any value in death!! So I don’t want to hear you bitching now!! I’m sick of that!!”

“Arguing from a position of emotion is easy, but if you release me in your era, you will undoubtedly regret it. Can you really bear the burden of hundreds and thousands of children’s deaths!?”

“What I’m saying is that I won’t let you kill anyone!!”

“How exactly will you do that!?”

“The Kaeshigami that Hyakki Yakou was talking about!!”

We shouted back and forth while sliding down the slope.

“If you can keep from killing anyone for nine years, you lose your killing trait and become a Kaeshigami, right? Just like the vengeful spirit that nearly destroyed Kyoto was worshiped as a god, you can become a harmless Youkai!!”

“I told you I’d recalled the flavor of blood, didn’t I!? I’ve already broken free of my limiter. I can’t hold back for even a day!!”

“You don’t have to hold back.”

“What…!?”

“Didn’t I tell you I’m from the future? But unfortunately, my time travel technique only works on just the one person. If I try to carry anyone or anything back with me, they or it won’t be protected from the flow of time. Simply put, they’ll directly experience the amount of time I’m traveling through. You get what I’m saying now, don’t you? If I jump ten years into the future while holding onto you, *you’ll be forced to experience ten years’ worth of time in an instant!* So!! You don’t have to hold back!!”

“……
……”

“It’s true you might be a Youkai created from people’s desire for a monster that would get rid of their eyesores of children,” I said while pursued by the avalanche of death and carnage. “But doesn’t that also mean you’re absorbing the anger and hatred of those foolish parents?”

“…?”

“You were created by gathering up all of those negative emotions. So if you weren’t here, where would those feelings be directed? Wouldn’t they be sent toward those parents’ children in the form of abuse?”

In other words…

“If you could evolve into something that could endlessly absorb parents’ hatred yet control it without going on a rampage of your own, wouldn’t that make you a guardian deity of children? You’d just be absorbing parents’ desire to abuse their children. You’d be calming those feelings before the abuse actually happened.”

A Kaeshigami was something feared by everyone but revered as necessary by everyone.

“In my time, there’s a monster called the Aoandon.”

I recalled the essence of that ultimate enemy.

“She’s a Youkai artificially created from an intentionally twisted version of the Hyakumonogatari. We were unwittingly a part of that plan by being made to kill each other in a place called Zenmetsu Village. Ha ha. Now that I think about it, she’s kind of like our child. I didn’t realize it until I saw that construction paper ten years in the past here.”

I couldn’t laugh at anyone.

Not even at those selfish adults whose negative thoughts had formed the Aburatori.

“So.”

I would redo it all here. I would take it all back.

I would save him and work with him!

“Could you lend me a hand? It would take a great power to defeat the Aoandon, but it would take an even greater power to save her. *Please help me save my child.* And to do that, please become a Kaeshigami that protects the children. You’re the only one I can ask, so will you do this?”

The Aburatori reflected on my words for a while.

Without worrying about the horde of Youkai approaching to take his life, the Youkai pondered the meaning of the words directed his way.

And finally…

“Very well. I have no reason to turn down your suggestion!!”

This time, we held our hands even more tightly.

Immediately afterwards, the sound of bursting fireworks surrounded us.

After an especially loud noise, our bodies vanished from the past.

In the Gap Between Timelines 2

Did the concepts of time and space even exist here?

I didn't know the details, but I could perceive myself and the Aburatori as distinct individuals.

It was strange to have "time" to think while traveling through time, but that blessed the two of us with a chance to share our information.

"This Aoandon sounds like quite the unusual Youkai. To be honest, I do not think my power alone will be enough."

"Agreed. She brings together one hundred ghost stories and can extract the individual parts to create brand new ghost stories. We can never defeat her in number of paranormal powers. A normal Youkai with just the one paranormal power wouldn't stand a chance."

"Then…"

"But the Aoandon herself can't use that power to its fullest. She has someone with her for paranormal support, so she probably has something like a Package embedded inside her. If that's removed, she'll lose control of her power. Simply put, she'll return to being a normal Youkai like all the others in the Youkai encyclopedias."

"The core embedded inside the body of a Youkai…of your child."

"With a Youkai that removes children's organs, we might have a chance. Of course, we'll only have the one chance."

I was probably the only one that knew why the Aoandon was so crazy. It was possible not even the Aoandon herself knew.

She had been born during the madness at Zenmetsu Village.

Just like the Aburatori was a collection of the feelings of parents who disliked their children, the Aoandon had been born by absorbing all of the gruesome madness the people at Zenmetsu Village had caused.

She had apparently been released into the outside world afterwards, but that had not changed the "directionality" given to her by her birth.

She could freely search through sea of data, but she would naturally gather only the dark and the grotesque.

She had seen only the negative and hopeless aspects of this country.

She had absorbed all that and transformed into something with an even more solidified existence.

It was most likely my responsibility for not letting her see anything that made her not want to destroy this country. We had all been desperate to survive at Zenmetsu Village and we had repeated that hellish scenario dozens or even hundreds of times. That was a mistake on my part.

A failure of a parent had created a monster.

So I alone could not abandon her.

I didn’t have the power to save the world or to save the country. I might not even have had the power to save the village. But whether a parent saved their child wasn’t determined by their power.

“If you traveled into the past, will we return at the exact moment the time travel was activated?”

“No, that was after everything was over. It felt like we had already used all of the methods we hadn’t wanted to use. So it would be best to return a little before that. I don’t know if it will work or not, but I know what moment I want to return to…”

“What do you mean?”

“When do you think the enemy will have their guard down the most?” I asked back. “I think it’s when they’ve used their greatest trump card and allowed the thread of tension to go slack. They might just be in a good enough mood to lower their guard. If we aim for that moment and break through the wall of time for a surprise attack…”

“We can reach the Aoandon?”

“We have to start with the first step. If we don’t pull this off, the rest isn’t going to work.”

And this method would mean we could *avoid using up the Ver. 39 which could only be used once.* Her power was hers. It wasn’t to be used for humans by humans.

I wouldn’t let this end just by obeying Hyakki Yakou. I wouldn’t let the Zashiki Warashi be used as a tool.

So I would settle this my way. I would take responsibility.

I’ve seen everything, Aoandon.

I might only have an empty argument from emotion and it might not change my physical strength any, but I’ve remembered the most important thing.

So now it’s your turn.

Wait for me, baby.

I’m going to scold you, discipline you, and then save you.

Chapter 7: Jinnai Shinobu@Total War, Break Through the Center

Part 1

It all came down to an instant.

“Tselika Wien Alpha Chelydia Lumidrier. Appear in the form we desire to grant what we desire to the extent we desire. …Appear, Tsuerika Nyorai. It is time to begin your work.”

Yes.

This was the moment when the Aoandon Group felt most victorious. They had passed the greatest turning point, the thread of tension had relaxed, they were filled with excitement despite knowing how dangerous it was, pleasure and relief exploded in their minds, and they could not help but lower their guard.

When you knew it was coming, it was easy to take advantage of it.

So…

“Aoandon!!!!!”

As if tearing through space itself, I broke through the barrier of time with the Kaeshigami by my side. I immediately rushed right up to the Aoandon.

“Wha-…?”

I didn’t wait for her voice of surprise. Hyakki Yakou’s Hafuri was confronting her, but she didn’t matter either. We couldn’t win in an all-out fight with the Aoandon, so I attacked when her guard was down. I attacked just when she had gathered all of her cards to form an unbeatable hand.

I rushed straight in like threading a needle.

The Aburatori and I no longer needed words to communicate. All I did was swing my right arm horizontally and the Kaeshigami released a metal skewer with a synchronized motion.

The single skewer stabbed deep into the center of the Aoandon’s chest.

The blue Oni’s eyes opened wider than I thought possible. Time seemed to have frozen as I grabbed the skewer embedded in her chest and pulled back with all my might. With a sticky sound, a fist-sized pale blue cube came out. It was a collection of straight lines, a symbol of artificiality. It looked like a jewel, rather than an internal organ.

It may not have actually physically existed.

It may have been that the Aburatori's ability to remove internal organs had given physical form to something like program code intentionally written inside her.

It didn't really matter.

Not as long as I could take away the core that made the Aoandon special!

"…"

My eyes met the Aoandon's from fifty centimeters away.

Bluish-white phosphorescence glowed from the tip of the horn on her forehead.

A moment later, a deafening sound much like clashing swords rang out. Neither the Aburatori-turned-Kaeshigami nor I could keep up physically or mentally with what had happened.

A dull sensation passed through the center of my body near my spine.

The Aoandon's right hand had pierced through my stomach.

"Boy!!"

The Kaeshigami tried to rush in, but the Aoandon knocked him to the side with her left hand.

She had erased her smile to form an entirely blank expression.

"Have you forgotten?"

I coughed out the blood welling up from my throat, dyeing her cheeks red.

"I am that which exists *beyond* the one hundred gathered fears. Without Saiki Kazu and Matsukai Hiroshi's equation, I can no longer create an infinite number of derivate stories, but I still have one hundred times the power of a deadly Youkai."

"Ha ha. Is that so?"

She was also talkative.

I somehow managed to hold my right hand out horizontally even with her arm piercing my body. I held it toward some other place, toward the greatest evil that Saiki Kazu had summoned somewhere in this rural landscape.

"…ng. …w……ed…, …f… ……ri…, …b……, ……s…… …h……, …..gh… …s… …… e……"

I already know how to defeat you.

That archdemon severed the bonds between people, destroyed those connections, and prevented any kind of cooperation. Without that, the battle between Hyakki Yakou and the Aoandon's group would not grow quite so hellish.

"For the aforementioned reasons, the veil of ignorance may become the key to the door of the unknown. I name the soul of Marguerite Steinhols as a new demon and command her to pass through the door in that vessel of flesh!"

I was the only one that knew any of that, so I had to do something about it.

Listen, Tselika.

I may have had to cheat and jump back in time a little.

But an enemy I've already defeated once is hardly going to be a real threat! You small fry!!

"Return, Marguerite Steinhols!! Cast aside your old self and take hold of your new self. Like a snake shedding its skin, cast aside the name of Tselika Wien Alpha Chelydia Lumidrier and fill yourself with a bright new soul!!"

A gust of wind blew through a distant area.

Tselika herself probably had no idea what had happened.

In this timeline, not even fifteen seconds had passed since her appearance, so she might have just thought the summoning had failed.

But the Aoandon would have noticed since she was right in front of me.

That had been no coincidence and no accident. She had drawn her cards from the deck and prepared the most powerful hand, but it had been stolen from her by a kid on the verge of death.

"What did you
doooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!?"

I ignored her.

Was that so much of a shock that you've forgotten what you need to do, Aoandon? Your priority should be getting this thing back.

A smile formed on my bloody lips as I grabbed the pale cube I had removed with the Aburatori's skewer.

Then I stuck it in my mouth, chewed, and swallowed.

"You… How do you keep doing this!?"

My vision seemed to shatter.

The program code built for a Youkai must not have agreed with the human body. All of my senses vanished in bluish-white sparks as if a high-voltage current had bene sent straight down my spine.

"You idiot! That's based on my traits! You won't gain my powers if you swallow it!!"

"Maybe…not…"

I wouldn't have still been standing if the Aoandon's arm hadn't been stabbed through my stomach.

I had lost the ability to know what was happening to my body.

“But I took it from you…both Archdemon Tselika and the secret behind your irregularity. And now that you’re *nothing more than an amazing Youkai*, do you and your companions really have the strength left to take on Hyakki Yakou and their Top 5?”

“…”

The Aoandon immediately replied with an incredibly simple action.

My sparking senses rapidly returned. They were all focused on a feeling of extreme pain. The Aoandon had bitten at my throat. This was nothing as kind as sucking my blood. She began biting and chewing through both flesh and bone.

Yes, I had a feeling you’d do this.

She had no way of knowing what change would come over the program code while it was inside my body, so it made sense that she would try to retrieve it before the damage could progress any further.

But…

“You were created from the completion of one hundred ghost stories…”

Have you still not realized what’s right in front of you?

I said an enemy I’ve already defeated once is hardly going to be a real threat…but that doesn’t just apply to Tselika.

“Then what about 110? Or how about 120? As the number leaves that perfect framework of 100, the golden ratio holding your body together will crumble.”

“Eh…?”

The Aoandon looked like her thoughts had ground to a halt.

Yes, those were the same words I had said on the empty tour bus running through the blue birth canal at the end of the Zenmetsu Village incident.

When she removed her mouth from my throat, she seemed to catch on.

Her mouth was covered in something dark red. In her haste to retrieve the stolen program code, she had left the “data port” open and *let in the foreign object known as Jinnai Shinobu.*

“…Ah…gh. Ahhh…”

“Take it,” I said with a thin smile. “Extract the data in the flesh and blood you’ve eaten and commit it to memory. …I didn’t have time to check through the detailed conditions and logic behind it, but if I’m right, my memories should be implanted inside your head.”

“Gh…”

“My data will be treated as a foreign object inside you and I’ve been through countless incidents involving Youkai. I’ve got plenty of ‘ghost stories’ stored in there.

You were created from precisely one hundred stories, so can you really endure having that number changed?”

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

A moment later, she lashed out in anger.

Her small mouth opened as wide as possible and bit through flabby things that I’m hesitant to describe. Strangely, it seemed I could no longer feel pain.

It was too late to turn back.

She could not stop the bug in her code, so she focused on retrieving the program code as initially planned. She was betting on the possibility that such a slight malfunction could be suppressed by that great power.

“Why…?” asked the entirely red-stained Oni as she curled up and worked at chewing. “Why would you go this far!? All you’re trying to do is defeat me, so why would you choose to be eaten alive!?”

“Well…”

For some reason, she had left my face untouched.

I somehow managed to move my sluggish lips and force out the words.

“Because if you eat me, you’ll take my data inside you…”

“…”

A wet dripping sound continued for a while.

The Aoandon had briefly stopped chewing.

“That’s my point.”

“?”

“What is this!? Am I taking in corrupted data!? How…how could you possibly produce these kinds of feelings in such an extreme environment!?”

Oh, I get it now.

She only experienced the one timeline without traveling through time, so this answer looked a little sudden to her.

“…This was an impossible situation from the beginning.”

“What?”

I had traveled through time and returned, so there were now two Jinnai Shinobus here. One had lived through the single timeline and the other had returned via time travel. I didn’t know if I was a physical being or just a soul at the moment, but I knew this was a dangerous situation. There had to only be one Jinnai Shinobu.

But that aside…

“I can’t kill you.”

I had seen something in that room in the past.

I had seen that sloppy drawing on construction paper. Humans and Youkai were all holding hands and smiling with the message “We’re All Friends” at the top. I was never supposed to have forgotten that.

Once I looked at it from that viewpoint, it hadn’t been hard to see the truth of the Aoandon.

I knew what this most powerful of enemies really was.

“After all, you’re like my child, born from that Zenmetsu Village project.”

“—————”

“I only ever showed you this sort of thing, so it’s my responsibility that you turned out this way. It was all the fear, despair, and carnage I showed you in Zenmetsu Village that turned you into an incomprehensible monster. …So I’m not supposed to punch you. I’m supposed to rub your head and teach you that there’s more to life than this.”

Just one of the Aoandon’s cheeks twitched to a disturbing extent.

“…This was my conclusion.”

“Was it?”

“This was the optimal answer I derived!! It was not… *It had nothing to do with your influence!!*”

“*You’re only a baby, so don’t get so full of yourself.*”

I had been wrong to raise that baby in that dark red room of blood and gore. I had been wrong to throw her out into the world without teaching her about common kindness and other basic things.

So I would correct my mistakes.

I would use the first and only chance I had here!

“I don’t think I’ve lived a life worthy of praise.”

Yes, me.

Will you be able to smile?

I promised you on that day long ago that I could get along with any Youkai.

“But if you look through that data you took from me, can’t you find just one thing? Just one thing that makes you rethink destroying this country, this village, and this family?”

“You will die.”

“Yes, most likely. If I wasn’t willing to go that far, my feelings never would have reached you.”

“You’ll lose your place in the world you’ve tried so hard to protect! You understand that, don’t you!?”

“God, what a pain. Just take a look at the data already.”

I would die here.

I had broken through the barrier of time to find this truth, but it was looking like I wouldn’t be able to pass it on to the other Jinnai Shinobu.

But if it came to that…

You tell that ignorant Jinnai Shinobu, Aoandon.

This is your father’s final request. Surely my only daughter can do this much for me.

This too was communicated through the data.

Aoandon, you are “listening”, aren’t you? I don’t think I have the strength left to move my mouth…so can I only…leave the rest…to luck…?

Part 2

“Bwah!”

I held my mouth *on a farm road near a dry paddy field.*

“Uwehh!! Cough, cough!! Cough! Cough, cough!!”

My internal organs crawled and convulsed as if they had all malfunctioned at once. An intense shock ran through the center of my heart as if someone had pressed a gun to my chest and pulled the trigger.

I felt like my skin was being tugged at.

I shuddered at an intense feeling that something was out of place. It felt like someone else’s damage was pouring into my body or like I was being chopped to pieces by mistake. Was this oozing pain in my skin or my organs? Taking a trip to the hospital once this was over seemed like a good idea.

“Master! What’s the matter!?”

The micro-bikini Succubus sounded confused.

“Is it due to that archdemon? It looked like the summoning failed, but did the miasma of the exorcism reach you?”

“No, it isn’t that,” I groaned while placing my thumb in my mouth.

I didn’t know why, but I knew I had to do that.

I used my canine tooth to bite into my thumb. The flavor of rusty iron oozed out onto my tongue. I sensed death while also receiving a torrent of data I shouldn't have known.

"*Tselika's summoning succeeded*," I said while holding my reeling head.

These were not my memories. At the very least, they weren't inside my own head. It seemed to be using some kind of external storage. The data that should have been erased when Jinnai Shinobu died had been unable to disperse because another Jinnai Shinobu was still alive. Unable to remain in this world or continue on to the next world, it had wandered through this space. It was almost like a ghost and I was simply accessing it through the flavor of blood.

But it didn't matter what it was as long as I could use it as a weapon.

Whether it was external data or corrupted data floating to the surface, it told me the correct answer even if it did not feel real to me.

"*More importantly, where's the Aburatori? He turned into a Kaeshigami after traveling through time, so I doubt he would've been killed that easily.*"

"Master…?"

The Succubus was clearly confused, but I didn't have time to explain.

What was going on? I used the flavor of my thumb's blood to access the data. If *this version of me* could grasp this data, did that meant *that Jinnai Shinobu*'s data remained inside the Aoandon after she devoured him?

Had it been moved or copied?

Depending on what had happened to the files, the Aoandon could still be moving at full power. Defeating Tselika was an MVP-level accomplishment, but that alone wasn't enough. I had to drive Hyakki Yakou and the Aoandon's group from the village and retrieve my normal life!

"…"

The young man in a dark suit…was his name Saiki Kazu? Anyway, he had tried to summon Tselika and had in fact succeeded, but *that Jinnai Shinobu* had immediately defeated the archdemon.

The witch named Marguerite Steinhols lay naked (Wow!) at his feet and he was glaring at me from over ten meters away.

He spoke while barely moving his lips, almost like a ventriloquist.

"*When* is your soul from?"

"I'm me," I replied with a thin smile. "I've just cheated a little to take a small step outside the norm."

His power was an unknown, but he didn't seem to have given up his humanity like Hishigami Mai or the Illness Magic User had. Even if he had *cut Archdemon Tselika away from himself* to have her stand at his side.

But once that archdemon was sealed away, he was no more than a normal human.

Meanwhile, I had a paranormal Succubus on my side. That demon couldn't breathe fire or tear through a metal panel with her claws, but she was immune to purely physical attacks like a blade or a bullet.

"Out of the way."

So I grew bold.

"I want to know what happened to the Aoandon…to that baby. I don't have time to deal with you. Get lost if you know what's good for you."

"I see."

Saiki Kazu silently turned his head and stared coldly into the distance.

He was most likely looking to the small woods where the Aoandon and Hyakki Yakou's Hafuri were confronting each other.

"The equation has fallen apart. …No, it may be more accurate to say the Aoandon's structure has changed. Perhaps I should say the software remains unchanged, the base OS has been forcibly updated so many times that the software is no longer compatible."

"…"

"Did you change the number of stories forming her? Not bad for such a short time. This may be an abnormality created by the constant contact with Youkai in an Intellectual Village."

"Enough talk."

I knew I was relying on outside help, but I would utilize this chance. I couldn't defeat both Hyakki Yakou and the Aoandon's group, so I needed to attack the Aoandon's group while they were rattled. If I could quickly defeat one side, there would be no more reason to continue fighting in this village.

"Will you willingly let me through or will I have to punch you first? It's your choice."

"Now, I have a question for you and your unwitting expertise."

Saiki Kazu slowly raised both hands and continued speaking without moving his lips.

"You analyze the structure of Youkai and attack their weaknesses. Or you reveal the Youkai built into a criminal Package and find a loophole. In that case…"

His emotionless eyes pierced through me, the master of a (low-ranked) paranormal demon.

"Will that usual skill be of any use if you ran across a Youkai not found in any old tome or any database? Wouldn't that make for an interesting test?"

Part 3 (3rd person)

Darkness covered everything.

The Aoandon had been thrown out into darkness too deep to distinguish one direction from another.

This was not a real or physical phenomenon, but it took her a few seconds to realize the excess data taken in from Jinnai Shinobu had directed her mind inward rather than outward.

Once she was aware of it, she saw countless bluish-white lines running through that darkness. It was a sea of data. It was her very essence and also the life-giving womb that had created her.

There was something there which clearly did not belong.

She did not know if distance meant anything here, but it appeared to be about five meters in front of her.

The biological lifeform known as Jinnai Shinobu stood in the sea of data.

“…Dh…”

She groaned while holding a hand to her shaking head.

A mass of incomprehensible data was tormenting her sense of self. She had taken in the human data of Jinnai Shinobu as much as possible. Words could lie, but data could not. The path the boy had walked filled her mind.

It could not all be summed up with some lofty ideals.

He had met several Youkai, encountered filthy Packages using those Youkai, and gotten involved in countless incidents.

When he had faced those incidents to resolve them, he had not always been driven by a sense of justice, ethics, or morals. Oftentimes, he simply wanted to live and for that reason doubted the friends and family around him.

But the Aoandon did not understand.

She understood why he would doubt those close to him. She did not understand why he was so attached to this ugly world.

She felt she understood just how ugly the world was.

She had been born from the incident in Zenmetsu Village. When she had searched from there, as if branching out her knowledge, she had learned just how cruel a reality this was and just how many people spread irresponsible rumors without facing that reality. It was not confined to Zenmetsu Village or that corporate prison. When she had searched for similar Package-related incidents, she had found the screams of people being similarly crushed and others taking irresponsible revenge on each other.

The world was full of blood and gore, red and black.

Why would he want to remain here?

In the sea of data, she did not need to speak her question aloud. The Jinnai Shinobu (technically, just his data) standing before her held out his right hand. His index finger seemed to be pointing right in front of her nose.

No, that was not it.

He was actually pointing at something directly behind her.

What was that something?

Driven by that simple question, she slowly looked back over her shoulder.

Something happened a moment later.

“…… ……”

The next thing she knew, the sea of data had left.

Her mind had shifted from inward to outward. The smell of humus tickling at her nose and the rusty iron flavor in her mouth forced physical reality back onto her.

She was sitting on the ground and her eyes dropped to her bloody hands.

Her fingertips were trembling.

She had eaten human flesh. She had ripped open his gut, pulled out his entrails, used her white teeth to bite through them, and swallowed them.

Youkai that sucked blood or ate organs were not uncommon. Most of the deadly Youkai that did not curse their victims used such methods.

She had gathered the fears of one hundred ghost stories, so she too had that ability. It was not to the point that she needed to eat people to survive, but if she switched over to the proper mode, she could eat a human body without hesitation.

And yet…

“Why…am I trembling…?”

The worst and greatest Youkai was dumbfounded.

The rusty smell stabbed deep into her nose, a strange warmth was caught between her teeth, the sensation of her chewing her meal lingered in her teeth and jaw, a stickiness remained on her tongue, and some hair was caught deep in her throat.

And altogether…

“I find it…disgusting? I…I’m the monster that exists beyond the one hundred fears. Why would I be feeling this human sensibility?”

“So you have lost your will to fight?”

A metallic sound rang out.

While sitting on the ground like a mere girl, the Aoandon turned toward the source of the sound and found the adult and child Hafuris glaring at her with the same family emblem on their clothing. The adult one held an eerily glittering Japanese sword.

“Would that be accurate?”

“What…are you…?”

“Hyakki Yakou is the greatest paranormal organization in the country…no, the world. As their leader, I should probably hold my tongue here, but to be honest, I do not have an accurate grasp of the situation either. That is why I am asking you.”

“…”

“Are you still a being that will bring harm to mankind?”

“Don’t…joke. I don’t need a reason. I’m doing this because everyone wants me to. Not even Jinnai Shinobu could do anything. He didn’t affect me in the slightest.”

“Yes, a mere high school boy could not do a thing,” bluntly admitted Hafuri. “And isn’t that why you’re so shocked *that you did not receive anything from him*?”

“Wha-…?”

“Jinnai Shinobu may have been trying to give you some kindness. He may have been trying to stop you with that. But it did not reach you. He bet his life on it and was literally devoured, and yet he was of no use whatsoever. …But you find that regrettable. He taught you the meaning of sorrow. In a way, doesn’t that make this his victory?”

The Aoandon was a deadly Youkai created from the combination of one hundred ghost stories, one hundred rumors.

That made her very interested in listening to what people had to say, regardless of whether it was good or evil. Even if it was a stranger or her enemy, she was not opposed to accepting data.

But she had been unable to do so.

She had not received any of what he had bet his life on telling her.

What if that had been the dying words of the individual she could call her father?

“No…”

The word escaped her trembling lips.

For some reason, her lips were trembling against her will.

“I am the being that exists beyond the one hundred fears. I would never hold that kind of normal, worthless, and pointless-…”

She trailed off when she realized the truth.

She could not gather any strength in her body. Some of her curses only required a glance or a thought without any actual movement, but not even they would target properly.

“This does not seem to be a problem with your bodily structure,” calmly analyzed Hafuri. “It takes an unimaginable level of resolve for a human to intentionally kill another human. Of course, such feelings do not always show themselves between human and Youkai.”

“Ah…ah…”

“But what if a Youkai were given the same sensibilities as a human, even by some underhanded means? Even if you have one hundred deadly powers and even if you use them to produce unlimited possibilities, it seems your finger stops before pulling the trigger. We had only ever thought of killing, so this is a truly fascinating method for Hyakki Yakou.”

“Ahhhh

The Aoandon's sharp claws were only a few centimeters away, but they only trembled without managing to touch the girl's slender neck.

"I can't curse anyone, harm anyone, or kill anyone… How am I supposed to maintain my existence as an Aoandon like this!?"

"Children grow up by observing their parents, but they need not be bound by those parents' lives."

Once again, that was something Hafuri had been unable to do.

She had only been able to protect the world by following in her unseen parents' footsteps, but that was why she could speak of this ideal here.

"You must choose for yourself what life you will live. But of course, that is only after you have paid for everything you have done."

"…"

The Aoandon remained silent for a while.

She had countless means of brutally killing this girl, but they only existed as a function or ability. She could not actually use them. Jinnai Shinobu had created these new sensibilities within her by risking his life. He had placed a bizarre safety device to lock her weapons away.

"You aren't going to kill me?"

"After everything you have done, it would be hard to find a convincing reason *not* to kill you." Hafuri let out a troubled sigh. "But this possibility that Jinnai Shinobu has demonstrated is promising enough to warrant taking on this difficult challenge. Simply put, it would be a shame to kill you here and lose this process of neutralizing a deadly Youkai. Of course, it is hardly a viable method if it requires having someone eaten alive, but if we can analyze it and reconstruct it in a harmless way, it could revolutionize this small field of ours."

"I can't believe this," muttered the Aoandon while her vision went dark.

This conclusion was positioned as far from fear and despair as possible.

It was bright.

Had that boy handed his body over to her with this in mind? From what she could see of his data inside her, there were no traces of having calculated it out that far. But that was not the heart of the issue. Even if he hadn't calculated out every last part of it, he had known someone else would fill in the gaps. The bonds between people had brought this farther than anyone had predicted. It may have been incomplete and unfinished, but he had done everything he could to resolve this as quickly as possible and reduce the damage as much as possible.

Did that mean even this series of coincidences could be attributed to Jinnai Shinobu?

Like in the Straw Millionaire, this was the unseen power that joined people together. That was what he had presented for the Aoandon to process as a single system.

It had only taken him a little over a minute.

He had eliminated Archdemon Tselika, neutralized the Aoandon, and created enough of a power gap between Hyakki Yakou and the Aoandon's group that she would have a chance to surrender. …And on top of it all, he had given her a small bargaining chip to prevent her entire group from simply being slaughtered. Afterwards, he had vanished.

With all that in mind, the corners of the Aoandon's lips silently twisted.

"No."

"…?"

"*This isn't over yet. We still have him.*"

As soon as she said that, dense tension seemed to solidify the atmosphere, like thin threads twisting together to form a solid rope.

There was something there, but it was not Archdemon Tselika and it was not the Aoandon of the one hundred fears.

Hafuri could think of only one other option.

(That man in the Illness Magic's report who shot down our mobile fortress. He most likely trained his own body akin to Kodoku by killing the majority of those gathered for their group.)

"Aoandon!! If you don't want to waste the seeds Jinnai Shinobu has sown, then stop-…!!"

She started to shout, but then she stopped.

She had noticed the strange expression on the Aoandon's face. It could not be classified into any of the usual emotions.

It looked like someone who had secretly prepared a birthday party for herself, only to have all of those plans destroyed on the day of the party.

It also looked like someone who had no one show up to celebrate her birthday, only to have her friends show up to surprise her at the very last moment.

It was an utter contradiction.

It looked like not even she knew how to handle the data inside her.

"My words aren't enough to stop him. Nothing anyone in my group says will stop him."

After all…

"In a way, Saiki Kazu uses an even more *twisted* paranormal power than me."

Part 4

A black wind raged.

It took me far too long to realize Saiki Kazu, that ventriloquist-like man in a dark suit, had physically “moved”.

His claws slashed through the air right in front of me and tore the chest of my jacket open.

It wasn’t my own power that saved me.

First, the Succubus had grabbed my shoulders and leaped backwards with all her might.

Second, Marguerite must have felt a debt for being freed from Tselika because she reached out a hand from the ground and did something.

That was a demon and a witch.

With the help of two Western paranormal beings, I only managed to avoid the attack by a few millimeters.

There was more to him than just Tselika. Was he drawing on some other paranormal power? Was he drawing on the power of some Youkai?

“A fascinating ability.”

Saiki Kazu emotionlessly spoke as the Succubus and I only managed to move two or three steps back.

“Normally, my killer intent would have kept you glued to the spot. Is this the power that neutralizes the fear and creates a bond, giving you such a great affinity with any Youkai?”

“?”

“It is similar to Ranzono Sachi’s ability, but it is more indiscriminate and covers a wider range. If you were able to consciously wield it, you would have individually been able to recreate the phenomenon known as Hyakki Yakou.”

Something unpleasant spiraled through his words.

I bit my thumb and tasted the blood for a specific answer.

An avalanche of Youkai had responded to young Shinobu’s cry and chased down the Aburatori. No one had been in the wrong, but that had been the trigger to a definite tragedy.

I gained the knowledge through the external access, so I spat out my emotional answer.

“To hell with that.”

“I see. It may be your ability to speak back like this that leads the world’s paranormal beings to take your side.”

Acting tough was one thing, but I also had to figure out what to do.

First of all, what Youkai was Saiki Kazu using? Without knowing that, I couldn't find an opening. And buying time in a head-on battle was probably going to be difficult.

"Would you like a hint?"

Saiki Kazu made a shocking suggestion.

The Succubus whispered in my ear while staring at the man standing entirely still with his arms gently spread.

"(Master.)"

"(Yeah, unless he's just bragging, he's clearly trying to confuse us. But does that mean he has some kind of identity or weakness we would notice if he didn't hide it?)"

He did not wait for us to finish our discussion.

He spoke his own words as if drawing power directly from the text.

"One: Saiki Kazu can move too quickly to be seen."

The black wind roared again.

This time, the Succubus moved behind me. She passed her arms below mine and placed her fingers on my chest to hold me in place like a roller coaster's safety bar and then she flew high into the sky.

"Nhh!"

"Kyah!?"

Just before we took flight, I barely managed to grab the Umbrella and Lantern.

By the time I heard the Succubus's flapping wings, we were already twenty meters from the ground.

Tengu, Kasha, Keizoubou-Gitsune, Kamaitachi, Yamanba, Aburatori, the Nopperabou that surprises anyone who sees it twice. Is it a fast Youkai that can get ahead of its opponent?

"Two: Saiki Kazu can crush his target remotely."

The black wind came to a stop and became the dark suited figure once more.

The stopped man formed a gun with his right hand, like a child playing around, and aimed at the orange-dyed sky. In other words, at us.

First, the Succubus and I were knocked to the side.

Next, the region of space we had just been floating in was entirely compressed. A fist-sized glowing orange ball floated at the center. As if it had suddenly remembered gravity existed, it fell straight down. Once I realized it was the air's dust and dirt after it was compressed and heated, a chill ran down my spine. If we had been caught in that, we would have been immediately turned to mincemeat!

“That first impact was Marguerite’s help, but I doubt she can save us every time. Not to mention that she doesn’t have a contract with anyone at the moment and that man is far too skilled!!”

“I know that!!”

Makuragaeshi, Yamanba, Inugami, Killing Stone, Tsuchigumo, Nue, Furutsubaki, Zashiki Warashi, Oshira-sama. There are plenty of Youkai that use formless curses, but that doesn’t fit with the earlier high-speed movement. The only overlap is the Yamanba.

“Three: Saiki Kazu can predict his target’s future position.”

This time, I thought my vision had gone dark, like the power had gone out.

The dark suited man made only a small movement. While standing in the dry paddy field with his gun gesture aimed upwards, he simply shook that hand a little. However, it was a decisive movement. I could tell he was accurately pursuing the Succubus and me through the orange sky.

“Master!!”

“Not yet! Dammit. What Youkai is he using!?”

Kudan, Shaberi-Ishi, Zashiki Warashi, fox… Oh, damn. That rules out the Yamanba!! The more hints I have, the closer I should get to his identity and weakness, but this is only confusing me further. At this rate, he’s going to shoot us down before I can figure out-

“No, you don’t need to figure out what he’s using.”

A new voice cut in.

At the same time, a dull sound burst from the center of Saiki Kazu’s chest. A woman’s arm had forcefully pierced through his back and out the front.

I only knew one person who could do that.

With that woman, I could believe the idea that simply meeting her was deadly.

“Hishigami…Mai…?”

“*I only need to know you’re relying in some kind of paranormal power. I can kill all such things, so there’s no need to analyze every little thing like my sister and her murder mysteries.*”

Even then, the dark suited man’s expression remained unchanged.

Except, that is, for the single trail of blood dripping from the corner of his mouth.

And…

“Four.”

Unbelievably, he continued speaking.

His heart had been torn out, so he should have been done for as a living creature.

“The concept of numbers does not apply to Saiki Kazu.”

I heard a quiet footstep.

I heard more and more of them until they covered the entire area around us.

Because the Succubus and I were flying through the orange sky, we noticed the bizarre scene before anyone else.

It was a group of identical men in dark suits.

At least one hundred copies of the unemotional man named Saiki Kazu stood across the paddy fields.

“What…is this?”

I did not even have time to feel a chill anymore.

“What kind of Youkai power is he using!?”

Part 5 (3rd person)

Saiki Kazu watched Hishigami Mai racing across the dry paddy field.

The woman had used Jinnai Shinobu’s neutralization of fear to kill one of him and that told her he was not an insurmountable obstacle. That may have been the only reason she could continue moving without being crushed by the intense killer intent.

Still, he did not view this as much of a problem.

There was no concept of a “center” to his hundred or more bodies, so their senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch were all gathered together. He was aware of all those many senses, just like an insect’s brain processed the images from its compound eyes, but he could also shift his consciousness from one body to another. The sensation may have been something no human with just the one point of view could understand.

The closest comparison was to call it a system rather than a living being.

It may have been like sitting in a distant security room filled with monitors and switching between countless cameras to search for and follow one’s target.

“Is that all?”

“Is that all?”

“Is that all?”

His right hands formed guns.

More than one hundred index fingers aimed at Hishigami Mai. With Mai at the center, they seemed to form a giant flower or firework.

A single shot had the power of an antiaircraft gun capable of shooting down a strategic bomber ten thousand meters away, but over one hundred of them turned to explosive pressure and shot toward her from every direction.

In addition to the numbers and strength, Saiki Kazu had the power to predict the future. There was not even the slightest chance he would miss.

“Is that all the fragile power of good has to offer, Hyakki Yakou?”

“Is that all the fragile power of good has to offer, Hyakki Yakou?”

“Is that all the fragile power of good has to offer, Hyakki Yakou?”

“Tch!! I’m! A! Freelancer!!”

Hishigami Mai dodged left and right in living, flowing lines, but her efforts were not rewarded.

A portion of the scenery distorted and the very space around her was compressed.

But it was not enough.

She was one of the abominable Hishigami Women.

One second before the direct hit, Mai’s right arm plunged into the chest of a nearby Saiki Kazu and swung him around to use his body as a shield.

“You might be a monster that uses some strange Youkai, but I can restrain your attack using your own power. It’s like the unstoppable force and the immovable object. And amusingly enough, there are more than a hundred of you standing all around here! I can grab as many of you as I want!!”

More and more cursed shots flew her way as she yelled back at him.

Before the Saiki Kazu being used as a shield could lose his basic shape and fall apart, Mai would run to the next Saiki Kazu and acquire her new shield. Then she repeated the process. Using up the shields both secured her own safety and slowly wore down the numbers of her enemy.

It was nightmarish and grotesque, but it was the optimal answer that killed two birds with one stone.

However…

“I see. It would seem the same technique will not work on you forever.”

“I see. It would seem the same technique will not work on you forever.”

“I see. It would seem the same technique will not work on you forever.”

The exact same words came from the countless mouths of the countless Saiki Kazus.

It even came from the unconcerned expression of the one that was falling apart as Mai used him as a shield.

“Then I suppose I should move on to the next one.”

“Then I suppose I should move on to the next one.”

“Then I suppose I should move on to the next one.”

“?”

It happened before she could put her guard up.

“Five: When cornered, Saiki Kazu explodes, spreading a curse.”

“Five: When cornered, Saiki Kazu explodes, spreading a curse.”

“Five: When cornered, Saiki Kazu explodes, spreading a curse.”

“Shit!!!???”

Mai swung her right arm as hard as she could. The “shield” slipped off of her arm and flew into a group of several Saiki Kazus like she was bowling. The slender body swelled bloodily out around the chest wound and burst like a water balloon. A red mist spread in every direction, corroding all of the bowling pins.

(I can’t use him as a shield anymore. I guess I’ll have to reduce his numbers by inducing chains of explosions like a puzzle game. If I time the explosions right, I might be able to alter the course of his attacks. But…)

“Six.”

“Six.”

“Six.”

“Dammit! Are you really drawing out the power of a Youkai!? You aren’t just making it up as you go along, are you!?”

Those words seemed to give Mai a sudden realization.

(Wait…)

“Is that it? I can’t tell what Youkai you’re using no matter how much I think about it. Everything you’re doing looks like you’re adding in whatever powers would be convenient at the moment. What you’re doing is fundamentally different from all the Packages and other techniques of our small field. What you’re doing is-…!!”

“Saiki Kazu is a symbol of impurity, so merely touching him will curse you.”

“Saiki Kazu is a symbol of impurity, so merely touching him will curse you.”

“Saiki Kazu is a symbol of impurity, so merely touching him will curse you.”

All direct attacks were off limits.

Mai clicked her tongue, pulled her suppressor-equipped handgun from her boot, and pulled the doll-shaped wooden charm from the pocket of her hot pants. She swung the wooden charm in a vertical line as if passing it through an invisible card reader and space split apart. A Shikigami shaped like a girl in a short kimono stepped out.

This was the Deadly Dragon Princess.

Mai had always said that using this paranormal power meant she had 100% lost.

“Is this all that the fragile good has to offer?”

A single Saiki Kazu seemed to act as the representative and spoke without moving his lips.

As before, he worked to corner his target.

“When will you demonstrate powerful justice, Hyakki Yakou?”

Part 6

Given the situation, not even flying guaranteed our safety. In fact, the open sky made it easier for him to shoot us with his projectile weapon. However, randomly descending to the earth would only get us attacked by the countless Saiki Kazus.

Where could we land? Who could we ask for help?

…

“Succubus, land in those woods! Hyakki Yakou’s leader should be there!!”

“Ehhh!? They do kind of have a huge grudge against me for that Euro Security Force business, you know!?”

She immediately complained, but she seemed to understand that staying here would only get us shot down by Saiki Kazu. She reluctantly did as I said. The Umbrella and Lantern shut their mouths and did not utter a peep after hearing the term Hyakki Yakou.

I found a very strange scene there.

First, there was Hafuri. I had known her as a girl of about ten in a kimono, but standing next to her was another Hafuri who had grown into quite a sexy body. A closer looked showed thin threads connecting the young Hafuri’s fingers to the other one like a marionette.

Then, there was the Aoandon. She was sitting on the ground like a feeble girl, but her mouth and entire kimono were colored dark red with…

Ugh. Is that my…

“Wahhh! Papa!”

“Uuh! That’s not something a high school boy should be hearing!!”

“What am I supposed to do…? Thanks to you, I can’t use any of my one hundred or more paranormal powers! What am I supposed to do now!?”

“Ahhh!! Don’t run up and hug me like that!! It’s disgusting! Is all this sticky stuff my-…ahhhhh!!”

“I know exactly what I can do that you’ll like the least. After all, the story of Jinnai Shinobu is one of the ghost stories I was made from!!”

A blue light shined in her eyes as she rubbed her cheek against me.

She hasn’t had a change of heart at all.

All that’s changed is the upper limit of how much she can harm people! She still fully intends to crush me! This is like reverting a three meter man-eating tiger to a cub the size of a stuffed animal!!

And while I’ll admit she is something like my child created from the Zenmetsu Village incident, how does that make it my responsibility and no one else’s? My uncle and the Hishigami Sisters were there too! Not to mention Madoka-san! Especially Madoka-san! I need to speak with her later!

“What…? Boy?”

Another Youkai seemed utterly shocked.

The Kaeshigami wore a farmer’s outfit and most of his face was hidden by the hat with a giant eye drawn on it.

“What is it, Aburatori?”

“You are Jinnai Shinobu, aren’t you? But you…”

“I don’t know the details, but you don’t have to worry. I haven’t forgotten about you, Kaeshigami-san.”

“O-ohhh-ohhhhhhhhhhhh!! Boyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!”

“Ahhh!! What’s the matter with you, old man!?”

I already had my hands full with the red-stained baby, but now an emotional old man was clinging to me. The world had grown too psychedelic for me!

“Succubus, Succubus!! You embrace me too! Help!! I need some normal sexiness to average this all ouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuttttttttttt!!”

“No, thank you. Helping people is just disgusting. I am a demon, you know?”

Meanwhile, (the small) Hafuri placed a hand on her forehead and gave an exasperated sigh.

“Sigh… Why are you even here?”

“Saiki Kazu.”

I spoke the name while pushing away the old man and the Aoandon’s face, which was covered in (my) blood and gore.

“This isn’t going to end without doing something about him. Hishigami Mai is fighting him now, but who knows how long she can last against that monster.”

“I know. Fortunately, all of our Top 5 are still available. If I send them in, we can settle this in a quick-…”

“No!! If you do that, this village will be wiped from the map! You might be fine with that, but that might as well be the end of the world for me!!”

“Then what do you suggest we-…”

Hafuri trailed off as a solid sound was followed by a canine Youkai flying in and embedding itself in the humus.

“Th-that was an impressive forkball. It really dropped right on down…”

“Only Hishigami Mai would do anything this crazy.”

Hafuri crouched down and pulled the Youkai from the humus. It was the Sunekosuri that was always with Mai (and was almost constantly worried).

“Ah, Hafuri-sama!”

“Since you were thrown directly here, I take it you have some kind of urgent message. You can omit the formalities. What happened?”

“Th-that’s right! Mai-san asked me to tell you what she figured out about Saiki Kazu! Woof, woof!!”

“Tell me.”

After receiving Hafuri’s permission, the Sunekosuri seemed to stand at attention in the girl’s hand.

“Unlike a normal Package, Saiki Kazu does not seem to be borrowing an existing Youkai’s power or traits.”

“Is he using his own stress and mentality like the Illness Magic?”

“No. He has crossed the borderline of humanity to become an inhuman paranormal being.”

What did that mean? Had he erased every last one of his worldly thoughts to become a sage or something? Or had he used excessive pride or hatred of the human world to become a Tengu?

My body tensed up when I started thinking of those stories from picture books.

Wait. Don’t tell me…! But it couldn’t be!!

“In other words, rather than using an existing Youkai, he is creating a brand new Youkai. You could say he is using his own flesh and blood to build up a Youkai we could call *S@ik1 KAzU*.”

I could not speak another word for a while.

However, the clock was still ticking. The battle between Hyakki Yakou and the Aoandon's group and the battle between Hishigami Mai and Saiki Kazu were both still underway. I couldn't just ignore reality. I had to force my mind to think about this.

"That would explain it," I somehow managed to say. "That would be why I couldn't find an appropriate Youkai no matter how much I thought. Of course I couldn't. There wasn't anything to find in a Youkai encyclopedia or an occult-obsessed website. He was creating it himself!!"

"Akki Rasetsu was aiming for something similar: transforming the human body into a Youkai. But they were trying to fuse with an existing Youkai. They were never arrogant enough to try to create a brand new one."

"Hmm." The Aoandon sounded indifferent. "But I'm a blue Oni that a Youkai illustrator in the Edo period made up to represent all the mysterious phenomena said to appear at the end of the Hyakumonogatari. There was no academic value to the claim, but that illustrator was simply too well-known. The idea spread and it became known as the truth. That illustrator also invented quite a few other Youkai. It's said over a third of his famous illustrated Youkai scrolls were his own inventions."

Coming up with a Youkai, creating it, and mixing it with others.

The Dodomeki, the Hossumori, the Mokugyo Daruma, the Gotoku Neko, and the Aoandon. There were a surprising number of Youkai that became known because that illustrator had invented them. …In more recent years, similar legends were told about an extremely famous Youkai manga author.

Of course, since Youkai illustrations were often used as satire of society or the current age, no one saw any problem mixing in invented examples and it was often seen as a type of humor.

But…

"Are you saying Saiki Kazu can invent Youkai on that same level? This is more than putting a made-up Youkai in an encyclopedia. He's successfully getting everyone to accept them to the point that they have the same presence as a mountain god or sea god that's been worshipped for millennia. He can do all that artificially!?"

If so, he was the cruelest creator.

The Aoandon had used unfair powers in her direct confrontations, but she had only been creating infinite phenomena from a finite stock. This man was different. As a creator, he could create whatever he lacked whenever he needed it. There was no trick here. He was an infinite being from the beginning.

The Aoandon was the ultimate system, but she had been abandoned after release. Saiki Kazu was a system receiving update files every second.

Did he even have a weakness? Even if he did, wouldn't he have already patched it?

"Mai-san is doing everything she can to disturb him, but she is being pushed back because he can overwrite his powers and traits however he likes. She says there will be no stopping him once he crosses a certain line."

"Does that mean we could overpower him with the Top 5 if we acted now?"

Hafuri's words brought an unpleasant chill to my entire body.

At this rate, the most powerful five and the greatest Saiki Kazu would clash at full power. What would happen to Noukotsu Village? What would happen to the village where I was born and raised, where Madoka, Nagisa, and the others were collapsed unconscious, and where the Zashiki Warashi, Yuki Onna, and other Youkai were waiting out the disaster?

And even then, there was no guarantee they could defeat Saiki Kazu.

What if they couldn't?

What if even Hyakki Yakou wasn't enough?

The Aoandon…no, the community that was now centered on Saiki Kazu would not stop with the destruction of this remote village. I only had to remember what had happened on that casino-covered Gold Mine Island. The CIA had been planning to escape the country lest they be caught in the destruction of Japan triggered by something this group would do.

We had stopped the Aoandon, but we could not ignore Saiki Kazu who was continuing where she had left off.

We had to stop him here, leaving not even a hundredth of one percent chance of that happening.

"…"

But I knew that was being idealistic.

Realistically, how were we supposed to fight him now that he had grown so inhuman? How could we tear victory from his grasp? He could create brand new Youkai and overwrite his own traits and abilities whenever and however often he wished. He might not stop even if we crushed his heart and chopped off his head.

"…Wait."

"?"

"Yes, that's right. He overwrites and fills in his traits and abilities. He drags them along and connects them. If he can do that…"

I pictured a group of vainly spinning gears in my mind.

At the moment, the entire system was dead because the gears were not fitting together properly. But everything I needed was already inside the box. If I could only adjust the positions of the gears so they fit in place…

"I saw this somewhere… Where? It wasn't necessarily recently. After all, I traveled ten years into the past. Remember. Flip over your box of memories. What is it this on the tip of my tongue? Where did I see it?"

I bit my thumb and the flavor of blood allowed me to search through that external storage.

That was when the image returned to the back of my mind.

In the parlor, the Zashiki Warashi, Nurarihyon, and Kasha were sitting in a circle chatting. They were talking about their treatment in a summoning RPG and how the Zashiki Warashi and Yuki Onna appeared so often. And in that discussion…

——It sure is trouble when cultures combine or when you're mixed with or identified with another Youkai.

"That's it! That's it!!" I shouted.

"Master?"

"If Saiki Kazu is a perfect and faultless Youkai, then we just have to drag him down from that throne! We just have to mix him with another Youkai to mix together their explanations!!"

There were examples of this happening.

For example, the Japanese Youkai known as the Ubume and the avian Ubume from China. Or the Dakini-Ten which was a goddess riding a jackal in India yet rode a fox in Japan since there were no jackals in Japan. There were even Youkai and divine beasts that people started mixing together because they had similar names, colors, or shapes!

And I already had an idea of how to mix together those existences.

I had experienced it myself, after all!

"Hafuri, can you use your time travel Package? The one that uses the Kudan's prophecies."

"Wha-? How do you know about one of Hyakki Yakou's greatest secrets…?"

"It doesn't matter!! And don't try to tell me you can't. *This is the second version of this battle.* After defeating Tselika so quickly, you have to have taken far less damage this time around! If you could use it on the first go around, there's no way you can't now! Get it ready if you don't want Saiki Kazu to ruin everything!!"

It was the same as me accessing "his" memories from this external storage.

When two of the same person existed in the same space, the effect remained even if one of them died.

That Jinnai Shinobu and this Jinnai Shinobu had to have been almost the exact same existence, so the only real difference was the memories.

But that was enough of a threat. It was a great irregularity involving a time paradox. Plus, it was directly linked to memories and personality. What would have happened to my mind if I hadn't been able to access it properly and it was nothing but noise?

It didn't matter what was held inside the external storage.

Two versions of the same person existed in the same space. One of them died and became a ghost-like external storage. It was not either version of the person that mattered. It was the invisible thread connecting them. If it was carelessly messed with, couldn't even the most powerful foe be torn apart from within?

And we could reach that position with a time paradox.

First, we had to use time travel to make the same individual exist twice in a single world. If we then defeated one of them, we had a chance of damaging Youkai S@ik1 KAzU who would not budge no matter how much we attacked him from without.

“Hafuri, I have a question about that big…um, doll? Who created it and how?”

“The Illness Magic User. He combined thousands of types of fungi to create a perfect copy of a human on a physiological level.”

“I don’t care if it’s a rush job, it only has to look right. In that case, how long would it take to make one of those?”

“I would have to ask him directly to know for sure. However, this one was originally meant as an artificial surrogate mother with my traits built in. It would have been extremely carefully made to ensure the next generation leader for Hyakki Yakou could be born without issue.”

“Meaning?”

“The Illness Magic also creates copies of himself to confuse the enemy. If that level is sufficient, I believe he can design one almost immediately.”

Good.

That meant we had the time travel and the decoy copy forcibly made to match Saiki Kazu.

We only had to send the fake copy (which was technically something like a straw doll used to curse someone) into a different timeline a few seconds different from our own using the time travel Package. If we then destroyed that copy, the perfect Saiki Kazu would begin to access something. If we interfered, severed the thread between them, and filled it with noise, his mind would overload. Even if that did not defeat him, Hyakki Yakou’s deadly techniques could likely defeat him while he was standing defenselessly in front of them.

We could end this without creating a long, hopeless battle that was no different from negating a nuclear blast with another nuclear blast.

I could clearly see the path leading back to my normal life!

A moment later, I heard a deafening explosion in the distance.

“That was where the Illness Magic is fighting,” said Hafuri.

The battle had not grown as chaotic as before due to the rapid elimination of Tselika’s influence, but it was still an all-out war. Countless battles were underway all over the place.

In other words…

“If he is to come help us here, it seems he needs to settle his own battle first.”

Part 7 (3rd person)

The situation could easily be described as a chaotic, but if someone had been able to compare this second round to the first one, it would have looked quite organized.

The Top 5 maintaining their sanity and cooperation helped more than anything else. Simply put, Hyakki Yakou had successfully followed their initial plan for the battle.

The Illness Magic User wore the black special combat uniform of a SWAT member.

The Venom Clairvoyant had her eyes covered with a red cloth and wielded two old German handguns.

They stood back to back in the gold-dyed rural landscape.

They fought on the same side as intended by the identical family crests they bore.

“The Aoandon’s presence has vanished.”

“And Saiki Kazu’s has grown instead.”

“I see no sign of their hypnotism breaking.”

“It will not break unless it is actively broken. But in this case, it was caused by the Aoandon’s paranormal powers rather than the academic idea of hypnotism.”

“Meaning?”

“If they lose consciousness, it will end there. It is the same as the flames of a lamp. With nothing to reignite it, it only needs to be extinguished the one time. No matter how much fuel remains, it will never resume burning.”

“…”

When he heard that, the Illness Magic User stared straight forward.

He looked to the greatest foe among the enemy group before them.

“You’re so great. You’re so cool.”

It was the Byouki User.

The girl wore a short, yellow China dress, a jacket with cat ear decorations on the hood, and bandages seemingly placed randomly along her face and one leg. She used a Byouki, a variation of Kodoku. That fear was automatically mass-produced to the level required to kill her target.

He had supposedly defeated this girl once already.

If not for the Aoandon’s interruption, he might have saved this soul.

“Ah ha ha! Ah ha ha ha ha ha!! Why? Why do you have everything? Like a companion to stand back to back with!? I…I’ve fallen so very far and I’ve never – not once! – found anything like that!!!!!!”

Black shadows stood up as she screamed at him.

Each one was a symbol of disease and pestilence. A scratch from one of their claws would cause one's entire body to foam up, rot away, and have its protein boiled from within by an intense fever.

But even as hundreds and thousands of the Byouki surrounded him, the man's expression did not change in the slightest.

"I already gave you my answer."

The Illness Magic User had not been anyone special.

He had simply been given a home when Hyakki Yakou had taken him in.

So if this girl had been given a home and a symbol to bear, she may have been able to bring an end to her chain of despair.

"Ah ha ha. I didn't get it. None of it got through to me. I'm dumb, after all. I never seem to catch on. Everyone loses patience with me. Ha ha. Ah ha ha. I really am hopeless. Completely hopeless…"

"Then I will tell you as many times as it takes for you to understand."

With the sound of electricity running through a neon tube, a glowing white blade grew from between his index and middle fingers.

"What will you do?" asked the Venom Clairvoyant. "Request support from the bombers flying overhead?"

"Unlike before, I do not have laser guidance from Hishigami. The fuses may be removed, but who can say where in the village they will land."

"Then what will you do? Won't you be pushed back by the infinite Byouki welling up from the surface of the earth?"

"Venom, lend me your 'eyes'. …That pitiful girl is not even worth killing, so I will settle this here so she can recover."

When the blindfolded shrine maiden heard his brusque words, she sighed while still back to back with him.

"Oh, so we're still doing this your way, Onii-chan? And how am I supposed to react when you're so attached to a girl more than twelve years younger than your sister?"

"Did you say something?"

"No, nothing."

"Sister, I've been thinking this for a while, but a woman past the age of twenty-five really should not be calling her brother 'Onii-chan'."

"So you did hear meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

A short distance away, the Oomukade confronted Ranzono Sachi.

"*Come.*"

A bell-like voice spoke a single word.

That was enough for the earth of the surrounding paddy field to swell up. Youkai larger than a light vehicle burst out. They were mostly strange and grotesque animal-types such as the Tsuchigumo, Uwabami, and Gama, but that may have been due to Sachi's own special trait.

(That Jinnai Shinobu boy I met in Noukotsu Village had this same ability over an extraordinarily wide range, but in exchange for being limited to animals, Sachi can consciously control it and give it some level of directionality. …She seems to be summoning them. You really could call her a summoner right now.)

He sounded so concerned because the Aoandon's lingering hypnotism remained even if the archdemon was gone. Endlessly summoning Youkai without any kind of sacrifice or ritual was essentially a tactical weapon itself. If a medium or shaman had known of this, it may have been enough for them to direct a curse of hatred her way.

The Oomukade could not ignore this.

He could not carelessly let anyone see her. He had to seal this power away and prevent anyone from using her. He wanted to prevent her life from being manipulated for someone else's benefit any further.

"Can you hear me, Sachi?"

"…"

She did not respond. Countless Youkai surrounded her with the sounds of scraping metal claws. They lined up like shogi pieces.

They were prepared to defeat their enemy, the Oomukade.

Oddly muddy eyes still trapped by hypnotism turned his way.

The white rose corsage on the side of her head swayed weakly.

"I will…protect my friends…"

"So will I, Sachi."

"I will create a world where we can all be equal. To do that…to do that, I will do anything."

"You don't need some special world. The centipedes and spiders only needed to live secretly next to people's houses. No one needed to notice them. That's all there was to it."

The Oomukade gathered strength in his giant body.

That Youkai had begun as a single insect, but legend had it he had devoured a clan of dragon gods and driven them to the verge of extinction. He was a Youkai that ate Youkai. And when he had eaten a Byouki to protect Sachi, he had begun to take on the traits of Kodoku, the technique that had countless venomous insects and ferocious beasts fight to the death.

Ranzono Sachi had summoned quite a few Youkai, but he would not lose so easily in a pure competition of strength.

But that itself was a problem.

(My poison is too strong.)

His giant maw snapped together from the left and right and a strange purple fluid dripped down.

(This will do more than paralyze Sachi. It will kill her. Yet I cannot stop her through brute force either. There is nothing I can do like this.)

Aware of that, he calmly moved his thoughts along.

(Then I need to weaken my poison.)

He would do whatever it took to save this girl.

(Fortunately, Kodoku gathers all of the poison and curse into the final surviving insect or beast. …To put it another way, one's poison and curse are taken away when they are eaten. Tsuchigumo, Uwabami, Gama. I'm sorry, but I will be using you here. Eat my body and take away the excess poison I carry.)

If he could weaken his poison, he could knock Ranzono Sachi out without killing her.

If she passed out, the unnaturally summoned Youkai would return to their senses.

That would solve everything.

There was no guarantee the Oomukade would survive being eaten. The more he was eaten, the more power would be taken from him, so it was possible he would not have enough strength left to heal his wounds.

But he did not care.

Even if he misjudged his strength and got himself killed, he would still be able to save Ranzono Sachi.

He only wanted to leave her with the possibility of exchanging truly warm words with the children she had met in this village instead of being drawn to that blue Oni like a bug to a bug zapper.

As long as he could save his friend, he did not care what happened to him.

"Come, Sachi!! Your enemy is right here!!"

"…Go, everyone."

As the two of them glared at each other, they crossed a line. Just like releasing a drawn bowstring, he prepared to release the strength built up past the limit in his giant body. A clash between great weights was beginning.

But in the very instant before that happened…

"The Three Bugs…that is, the Upper Corpse, the Middle Corpse, and the Lower Corpse. As the night of Koshin passes, travel through the barrier of Sarutahiko and report to the Heavenly Emperor. You are bugs the size of a fingertip, yet you are

foreign objects which remove the lifespan of all living things. Take the form of bullets, enter the body, and steal their strength! Three Corpses!!”

Gunshots rang out.

Normal blades and bullets did nothing to Youkai, yet bullet holes opened in the Tsuchigumo, the Uwabami, the Gama, and Ranzono Sachi’s other soldiers, and their bodies froze up as if glue had been poured inside.

The next thing the Oomukade knew, a blindfolded shrine maiden wielding two handguns stood next to him.

The bells decoratively tied to the old German handguns belatedly produced a clear ring. And those bells contained the symbol of Hyakki Yakou.

Her divinely thin coat danced with her movements.

“Who…are you?”

The shrine maiden grabbed a clip of spare bullets and pushed it into the top of the fixed magazine. The bullet portion was not made of lead. Instead, it appeared to be a dried and balled up larva.

“I am the Venom Clairvoyant of Hyakki Yakou’s Top 5. To be honest, I would not normally take on this odd job without Hafuri-sama’s orders, but the Illness Magic asked me to help out if I could.”

“…”

“And what’s this? Another little girl!? And she’s even younger than the Byouki one! First Hafuri-sama and now this monster summoner. Did something happen to you, Onii-chan!? (Worry, worry)”

“Hey, so what happened to the Tsuchigumo and the others?”

“Ah!? The Three Corpse bullets are meant for use against Youkai, but I can freely regulate their destructive power. That was not enough to kill them. I only put them to sleep for a bit.”

“Could you stop Sachi’s rampage with those bullets?”

“The Three Corpse bugs originally hid inside the human body, stealing one’s lifespan. Youkai have little concept of aging, but a normal human would be killed instantly by one of these.”

“Then I’m sorry to say you are merely in the way here.” The Oomukade agonizingly squeezed out the words. “I must stop Sachi without harming her. To do that, I must weaken the excess poison in my body, but that requires allowing her Youkai to devour me. Listen. Can you stop neutralizing the enemy Youkai? This is meaningless if they do not attack me!!”

“Oh? I wouldn’t be so sure.”

The Venom Clairvoyant immediately replied in a clear voice.

The St. John's wort clasp at her chest rustled.

“It is true that securing and suppressing such a young girl might be more difficult than simply killing an adult. But this was never a place for adults like us who have too much strength already. Isn’t it most natural for children’s problems to be resolved by children?”

“What are you…?” The Oomukade suddenly caught on. “Don’t tell me you’re dragging that boy into this! And this is one of the worst battlefields this small field has to offer!!”

“The residents of Noukotsu Village have been knocked unconscious by us in Hyakki Yakou. That was to prevent the Aoandon’s group from manipulating them with some sort of paranormal power. However, some humans surrounded by plenty of Youkai managed to remain conscious. That Jinnai Shinobu is a good example.”

“Are you saying that boy did too because he was surrounded by Tsukumogami? No…”

“This is not so simple. Jinnai Shinobu is simply that irregular a human, even if he is not aware of it. The boy in question passed out along with the others. However,” continued the Venom Clairvoyant. “It is said that insects warn of coming danger and I gain paranormal inspiration by raising *such things* in my body. Those insects can produce a high affinity for anyone’s body and input the data on any coming danger. On top of that, the human mind is easily shaken by danger signals. When used properly, those insects can act as the ultimate alarm clock.”

In other words, all the proper information had been inputted into the boy’s body.

In other words, that boy had woken while everyone else was passed out.

In other words, that boy who knew Ranzono Sachi’s situation had not hesitated to run onto the battlefield.

A new form appeared on that paddy field: Yonesaki Hiro.

Similar to Ranzono Sachi, that boy was loved by all Tsukumogami that were based on physical objects.

“Ohh, my master!! It’s dangerous! Why are you here!?”

“No, Umbrella. You need to prepare yourself too. It looks like it’s time for Hiro-sama to prove that he’s a man!!”

The Umbrella Obake and Lantern Obake met up with the boy.

Those Youkai had fallen silent as soon as the term Hyakki Yakou had been mentioned, but that had changed as soon as they had caught sight of their young master’s face. They had left Jinnai Shinobu and the others to run toward him.

“Umbrella, Lantern. I heard everything from a bug in my ear.”

The average-looking boy in a blue sweater and beige pants spoke quietly.

“So help me out here. I’m going to save Ranzono-san.”

The Umbrella and Lantern were not the only Youkai with Yonesaki Hiro. A sash slithered like a snake, a stone mortar walked on short arms and legs, a giant wooden

board of unclear use fluttered through the sky, and an empty suit of armor clanked as it walked.

“We need to help Hiro-chan.”

“Hiro-chan!”

“We have your back, so you do what it is you need to do!!”

Altogether, they were Tsukumogami.

The Yonesaki family repaired old tools and when their skill as craftsmen allowed a tool to live for one hundred years, it gained a will of its own like this. The Youkai repaid the family by swearing loyalty to every consecutive generation.

Meanwhile, hypnotized Ranzono Sachi stared at these new targets with her muddy eyes.

Her summoning voice left her lips.

“*Come.*”

The rural ground was destroyed and a great variety of Youkai appeared. With Sarugami, Baku, Takebunkani, Tesso, and more, there was everything from a giant monkey that simply abducted and killed people to a swarm of mice that devoured all documents.

Young gazes collided and several Youkai stepped forward on both sides.

Two voices cried out in unison.

“Get them!!”

“Get them!!”

A deafening sound of collision followed.

The heavy furniture such as cabinets and mortars dropped down on the Sarugami that swung its powerful arms and the giant Takebunkani that was protected by its thick carapace. The animal Youkai responded by swinging their arms and legs to send the tea table and chairs flying.

“We will make sure Hiro-chan wins!”

“Don’t bring shame to our master! Charge!!”

“Yaaa!!”

Even when they were knocked through the air or fell to the ground, the large plates and metal pots did not stop fighting. They had originally been normal objects, but they would not break so easily now that they were Youkai. They quickly got back up and charged right back into the fray.

“They might be Youkai, but they’re still just furniture,” mechanically said Ranzono Sachi. “While there are a few exceptions like the mortar in the story of the Crab and the Monkey, they generally do not have the ability to kill other Youkai.”

It had likely only been a small flame to begin with, but those negative words had been broadly interpreted from without.

“On the other hand, I have plenty of deadly Youkai among my friends. I can call as many of them here as I need, so I can’t lose. I *will* create a world where my friends will be accepted as equal!!”

And there was one Youkai that was truly deadly to Tsukumogami: the Tesso.

That Youkai had begun as the grudge of a high priest. According to legend, it had eighty-four thousand mice under its command and had eaten through all of the sutras and Buddha statues in Enryaku-ji, so it was the ultimate enemy of a Tsukumogami made of wood or paper.

“Kyah! Kyahhh!! This swarm of mice is biting me!!”

“Keep fighting, Lantern. If this gets too dangerous, then you escape into the sky!!”

“What about you, Umbrella!?”

“Paper umbrellas have long had their paper replaced. Did you really think I would fear having my paper broken after all this time!? Let’s do this, mice!!”

The sound of chewing continued.

It was the sound of the century or older Tsukumogami being eaten through.

Listening to it should have put Ranzono Sachi into a victorious mood.

However…

(…Huh…?)

Her heart had been as flat as the calm sea, but a slight ripple appeared there.

Or so it seemed to her.

(Why am I…happy…when I’m hearing…the screams of Youkai…?)

That question came to mind, but it vanished before she could find an answer. That prevented her from continuing down that line of thought. A vague unpleasant lump lurked in the back of her mind, but she did not know why it was there.

As a result, she focused on repeating the same action.

“*Come, come, come, come.*”

Each time she spoke the word, even more Youkai burst from the ground. They were all monsters based on bugs or reptiles. A normal human would have difficulty looking at just one of them, but this was a great swarm. Ranzono Sachi narrowed her eyes as a part of that grotesque scene.

“Gyaahhh!! It hurts!!”

“Bear with it. Our masters can fix us even if we break!!”

“But it hurts! I’m scared!! But…but I’ll do what I can for Hiro-chan’s sake!!”

Those screams did not allow her to comfort herself in the cradle of thoughtlessness.

These were the screams, cries, and shrieks of Youkai. They came from the furniture Tsukumogami instead of the grotesque spiders, snakes, and other animals, but they still shook Ranzono Sachi’s mind bit by bit. The flat water’s surface was now covered in the countless waves of a stormy sea.

“Stop…”

She was the one causing it, but while hypnotically trapped, the thought of letting up on the attack never occurred to her.

Instead, she set her sights on Yonesaki Hiro, the symbol of all those standing up against her. If he had not come here, she would not have had to attack these Youkai, so he was the cause. Her mind had been remade to think that way.

“Stop this!! Don’t you understand? You can’t defeat us like this! No matter what you do and no matter how much you struggle, you can’t defeat my friends!! So leave! Stop pinning impossible hopes on them and forcing them to work needlessly!!”

“They won’t lose.”

And yet…

“My family won’t lose.”

He answered immediately.

It was a ridiculous hope. Many Tsukumogami were being harmed in the name of that hope. Realistically, most of the Tsukumogami could only tackle their enemies and barely any of them could use a paranormal power such as a curse. And their destructive ability corresponded to their original weight. The heaviest of them was the stone mortar, but not even it could crush the Sarugami or Takebunkani with a direct hit.

In other words, they had not even the slightest chance of winning.

The more they fought, the more they would be worn down and the greater the damage to the Tsukumogami.

But then a great tremor of the earth overturned that assumption.

“Wha-…?”

When Ranzono Sachi looked over, her eyes opened wide.

A new object Youkai had appeared, but it was not a simple piece of furniture such as a cabinet or tea table.

It was an entire thatch-roof house.

The wooden structure had to weigh at least several dozen tons and it slowly approached like a dinosaur.

Was Ranzono Sachi familiar with a Youkai known as a Mayoiga?

It was heavy and thus slow, so Yonesaki Hiro's side had only needed to buy enough time for it to arrive.

And a Tsukumogami's tackle was as powerful as its original weight.

The stone mortar fighting on the front lines had only been around fifty kilograms.

"Bwoh."

In that case, the Mayoiga's attack would be *fifty to one hundred times greater.*

"Bwooooooooooooooooooooohhhh

They knew that was how a man would act.

They knew their master would not be able to just hide at the back.

They had known perfectly what Yonesaki Hiro would do.

This went beyond friends or comrades.

Yes, it was almost like they were family.

“Wha-…?”

Before Sachi could summon even more Youkai, the boy moved right up to her. He held a fist in front of his face like the boxers he had seen on TV, but he was not trying to punch her.

“Jatai!!”

A sash was wrapped around his fist like a bandage, but as soon as he held his hand forward, it stretched out and wrapped around Ranzono Sachi’s neck.

“Gah…!? My…voice…”

“Kosode-no-Te!! Go!!”

He swung his other hand and the cloth wrapped around it spread out. By the time Sachi realized it was a kimono, it had fallen over her head and covered her up. More than just having trouble breathing, most of her senses were now trapped in darkness.

Summoning did not work if she could not utter the summoning words.

Unable to aim or speak, she could not use her ability properly.

(I…)

Her carotid artery was being compressed more than her windpipe, so her mind began to flash in and out like she was caught in a judo stranglehold.

But even then, her objective grew to an unnatural size inside her heart.

(I will create…a kind world…for all the Youkai…)

But in that darkness, a tiny question briefly entered her mind.

What was she going to do once she made everyone equal?

She had a feeling someone’s smile had been there. She had a feeling someone had come at her head-on when she had been crying and shouting. She had a feeling a boy had seen the true face no one had ever accepted and called it pretty.

Because those thoughts had reached her as her consciousness faded, she was not sure if the voice she heard in the darkness was real or a figment of her imagination.

“Don’t worry, Ranzono-san,” the voice said. “I’ll save you!!”

After hearing that, consciousness slipped from the girl’s grasp.

A cold wind blew between the two opponents: the Illness Magic User and the Byouki User.

“Ha ha☆”

The surrounding battles were gradually coming to an end. Most of them were ending in Hyakki Yakou’s favor. With less of a burden on the Venom Clairvoyant, she could divert more of her resources this way.

In other words, the accuracy of the “eyes” borrowed by the Illness Magic User increased considerably.

His glowing sword had been slicing through the countless Byouki shadows as they automatically appeared, but he started doing far more than that.

After a great sound, his body slipped between the countless Byouki and shot like a missile toward the girl using them. He no longer had to spend time defeating them before advancing. He took the quickest route to her. It was true the Byouki would automatically calculate out the number needed to kill its target and produce the necessary amount. That meant no human or Youkai could defeat the Byouki User, but the arrangement of Byouki was not even. The calculation was for how to win by sending all of the created Byouki toward the target and cutting off their escape route, so she never would have expected the target to slip through that checkmate arrangement.

However, he slipped through the gaps.

By moving right up to the Byouki User, he could ignore the overwhelming numbers. It was much like using a sharp icepick-like blade to stab through the gap in the joint of a thick suit of armor and destroy the enemy’s weak point in a single blow.

(When it comes down to it, we both wield paranormal power.)

Their gazes collided head-on.

It was like a copy of a past photo. The same result occurred each time. In the trials by ordeal of an older age, it was believed that god would side with whoever was in the right. In that same way, it was plain as day who would win here.

“I know better than anyone how to save you. I would never make a mistake here, in this moment!!”

A white blade roared and stabbed into the source of the black disease.

That was a holy blade that sliced through one’s evil heart without harming the body.

Using a portion of the power of a heavenly god who had begun as a vengeful spirit that had threatened Kyoto, the Illness Magic specialist saved the girl.

Part 8

The surrounding battle had come to an end.

The Illness Magic User was free.

There was no more need to hold back.

Hyakki Yakou Leader Hafuri brought something like a small microphone to her mouth and gave her command.

“Illness Magic, use your power to create a copy of Saiki Kazu. The accuracy can be low. The bare minimum requirement is that it be recognizable as him.”

I heard something like a twig being stepped on and then a large mass grew up from the ground like fast-forwarded footage of a bamboo shoot’s growth. It started as a white pillar, but it began to crumble and formed detailed features. Various colors of decomposition formed the hues of the hair, skin, and clothing. I watched it transform into the ventriloquist-like man in a dark suit.

“Is the time travel Package ready!?”

“It is.”

“Send it five seconds into the future. If that makes the world or destiny or whatever think there are two Saiki Kazu’s in the same timeline, we’ve won. Once we destroy the fake doll, the residual data with no place in this world or the next will become something like external storage and begin linking to Perfect Youkai S@ik1 KAzU. That will be filled with noise, which will give us a chance to win!!”

I heard a sound of scattering sparks and then the fungal doll of Saiki Kazu vanished into thin air.

Five seconds later, this would all be over.

“Succubus, Aburatori.”

“Yes, master.”

“Leave it to me, boy.”

After an even more violent sound of sparks, Saiki Kazu’s model reappeared in this world.

We had no reason to wait.

After a great roar, the doll was utterly smashed to pieces.

Part 9 (3rd person)

Saiki Kazu’s heart felt a shock like a stake had been driven through it.

He supposedly existed as dozens of bodies at once, but every last one of them tilted its head. As if synchronized ahead of time, the same change came over them all.

And that way of thinking brought a certain idea to mind.

“Synchronized? It can’t be…”

“Synchronized? It can’t be…”

“Synchronized? It can’t be…”

The situation accelerated.

A false silver sandstorm filled all of his senses. A headache and nausea overwhelmed all else. His sense of up or down was lost and his mind was too disturbed to even try to calm his confusion.

Beyond the silver sandstorm filter, Hishigami Mai threw something toward one of his bodies while on the verge of being cornered herself. It may have been a grenade and it would not have been a real problem even if it was, so he caught it in one hand.

It was a satellite phone.

It was apparently already connected somewhere. The pain filling him only made him more expressionless as he brought the phone to his ear and heard a young girl’s voice.

“Surrender. You have three seconds.”

“…”

“…”

“…”

Those words were enough for him to understand.

This organization, this field, this society, and this nation had been built up to the point that they could defeat Youkai S@ik1 KAzU.

The fragile good had been eliminated and a powerful justice had been set up in its place.

Once upon a time, there was a young assassin. He had been trained that way by *a large criminal organization*. A certain police detective had said he would rescue the young boy from that hellish world, but fate had a twisted sense of humor and he was ordered to kill that very detective.

Simply destroying a great evil was meaningless.

If the fragile good was not eliminated and a powerful justice was not set up in its place, the cycle of tragedy would continue.

So…

“Heh.”

“Heh.”

“Heh.”

That man, who like a ventriloquist never moved his lips, changed his expression ever so slightly to form a smile.

This was not what he had planned. He had intended to use the Japanese DNA Standard to forcibly strengthen all one hundred fifty million of them like hammering a nail into a straw doll. If that had required betraying the Aoandon in the very, very end, he would have done so.

But if the result was the same, he could hardly complain about reaching it along a different path.

Thus, he had no regrets.

The promised three seconds passed and Hafuri spoke to someone other than Saiki Kazu.

She spoke the words of death.

"*Do it.*"

A moment later, Hishigami Mai's right arm pierced through the center of his chest.

The destruction of the one equally affected every single Saiki Kazu. Just like hammering a nail into a straw doll, an identical hole appeared in all of their chests.

Instead of damaging the hardware, this was more like the software damage of throwing a laptop on the floor to destroy the data inside. The damaged data spread through the network known as Youkai S@ik1 KAzU, spreading fatal errors all the while.

"Any last words?"

He did not answer Mai's question.

He silently dissolved into something like silver sand which vanished into the wind. The phenomenon seemed to contain the message that someone who had abandoned their humanity was not allowed a human death.

The enemy had nothing at all left to say.

The Hishigami Woman decided the man had left the world satisfied.

Part 10 (3rd person)

At a police hospital in Tokyo, Detective Uchimaku Hayabusa groaned on a bed without any knowledge of the battle being fought over the fate of the country.

He had been hospitalized after taking three bullets to the upper body in the firefight to end the incident involving Amagoi Haruka, aka PSI_ver_RAIN, the self-styled psychic middle school girl.

The swimsuit girl named Hishigami Enbi sat in the bedside chair while peeling an apple with a ghastly look on her face. …Just to be clear, that is not a misprint. Her face was just a little too Hannya-esque to be called joyful.

"Okay, your cute Enbi-chan is going to do her best to pamper her spoiled detective☆ …Huh? This isn't working right… Okay, okay. I'll have you saying 'ah' before long now. Eh heh heh. …Dammit, just peel already!!"

“This is why they shouldn’t give knives to idiots! It’s scary!!”

Uchimaku Hayabusa really did have tears in his eyes as he shouted back at her.

After a knock at the door, a large man stepped inside.

It was Sotobori Gaku, a detective in the organized crime division who specialized in *large criminal organizations*.

“Hi, Hayabusa-chan. I hear you ran into some political trouble and got yourself some medals of manliness.”

“Only you organized crime people brag about scars these days. And it’s why you people scare the rest of us. I hope these gunshot wounds heal up properly… I believe in modern cosmetic surgery!! Ow, ow, ow, ow!!”

“C’mon, don’t waste this chance! You should leave the scars!! Japan’s police like to solve our cases more smartly, so a policeman with three holes in his gut is a dying breed. You should set your sights on having at least seven scars!”

As he spoke, Sotobori set a paper bag down on the side table.

“Hey, Heavy Tank, what’s in that bag?”

“Just a little something to make your stay more enjoyable. When you’re holed up in the hospital, nothing sounds better than a greasy burger, right?”

“You idiot! I have holes in my stomach, remember!? I can’t eat something like this on the first day after the surgery!!”

“That’s too bad. Guess I’ll have to eat it.”

“You monster!! Uuh…just the smell is stimulating my hunger like normal. I feel like I’m staring at a full course meal through metal bars…”

Sotobori ate the burger and drank a soda, but since that was not enough to drink, he had to head over to the vending machines.

While he waited for the blended coffee to fill the paper cup, he heard a footstep directly behind him.

He casually turned around, but then his eyes opened as wide as possible.

An assassin of around ten stood there.

No one had believed him when he had told the police that this was the true killer of a certain old detective.

More than a decade had passed since then, so that assassin could not possibly still look like that. Sotobori knew that mentally, but something else refused to let him reject the idea.

He knew for certain that *this was him.*

“…ared…”

The boy’s small lips moved ever so slightly.

At first, Sotobori could not tell what he was saying and was not even sure this was something capable of producing a voice, but the voice gradually reached his ears.

“…Be prepared…”

“…”

“Be prepared. Youkai S@ik1 KAzU will return once you have forgotten. That is how he assembled his own body. So always be prepared in every way you can think of. That is the one and only way of keeping Youkai S@ik1 KAzU sealed away.”

That was the limit.

The assassin of about ten vanished like a crumbling sand sculpture.

Someone who existed all across Japan, ignoring the concept of an alibi, may have just vanished all at once.

A certain man simply wished to eliminate the fragile good and set up a powerful justice in its place.

His story ends here.

But if arrogance should ever again run rampant in this world, that monster would reappear as many times as necessary.

Chapter 8: Jinnai Shinobu@Transformation, The Price of a Certain Life

Part 1

I sat on the ground in the small woods remaining in the rural landscape.

Finally, everything was truly over.

Noukotsu Village had been fully protected from the direct clash between Hyakki Yakou and the Aoandon's group. We had made it to the end without any damage to my family, Madoka, Nagisa, or the Youkai.

The Aburatori who had supposedly strayed from the proper path long ago had been pulled up to the level of a Kaeshigami, Marguerite Steinhols had been freed from Archdemon Tselika, and the Aoandon was now powerless, so it may have been a nearly perfect result.

That left one major question on my mind.

"What's going to happen to the Aoandon now?" I asked from the ground.

Hafuri slowly exhaled in her mourning clothes.

"It would be easy enough to execute her here, but the enemy needs a psychological pillar if we are to get them to surrender quickly. It is also worth analyzing the details of how this deadly Youkai was neutralized without killing her."

"Meaning?"

"It would be best to let her live."

Only after hearing that did I breathe a sigh of relief.

Of course, it probably wasn't that simple. There might be some motivated by revenge who would want to hold a public execution of the Aoandon. But she was the leader of an organization as huge as Hyakki Yakou and she was the owner of that family crest dyed on her chest. Having her word meant a lot.

I had empathized too much with the Aoandon to send her off to be executed now.

At that moment, I heard footsteps crunching the dried leaves covering the ground in the woods.

I looked over, assuming it was the Illness Magic User, another Hyakki Yakou member, or Hishigami Mai, but then I gasped.

But my shock had to be nothing compared to Hafuri's.

After all…

“Hi, Hafuri. It’s been a while, but do you remember your dad? I’m so glad we can finally see each other like this.”

I saw a black dress suit and a slender face.

The young man had different colored eyes, an old monocle over one, and waist-length black hair tied back.

He held a small canine Youkai in his arm like a pet lover.

Something seemed horribly off, so I bit my thumb and accessed the memories via the rusty iron flavor.

…Majina!? But wasn’t he dead? Isn’t that why Hafuri’s leading Hyakki Yakou at the age of ten!?

That man who looked exactly the same as in the past turned to me.

“Someone in the past informed me of the assassination plot, so I was able to avoid it. …Yes, visitor, I escaped when it probably would have succeeded otherwise.”

When I heard the word “visitor”, I stopped asking if this was real or if that was really Majina. He had called me that when I had traveled into the past.

“Really…?” muttered Hafuri while standing in a wide-eyed daze. “It’s really you… father?”

“Yes.”

Majina smiled and patted the (female) Sunekosuri in his arm.

“While I escaped the assassination plot, I would have altered history had I acted out afterwards. That risked erasing the existence of the visitor who saved us via time travel, so we had to fake our deaths until the Aoandon incident had been resolved. Sorry about all the trouble this has caused you, Hafuri.”

“…”

She was frozen in place like she had been left behind.

I probably couldn’t even imagine the thoughts filling her heart.

Of course I couldn’t. The father she had thought for so long was dead had suddenly shown up and said he was alive after all. She had been denied what everyone else took for granted and had resigned herself to walking a different path from her peers, but all of that had just been turned on its head. For better or for worse, her thoughts would naturally grind to a halt and her legs would naturally give way beneath her.

“So.”

Majina casually continued while smiling toward Hafuri who was unable to tearfully embrace him like a scene from a cheap drama.

“Hafuri, you don’t need to lead Hyakki Yakou anymore. I will be taking that position back from you.”

……
……*Eh?*

What did…he just say?

I thought I had misheard, but I couldn’t possibly have and he continued from there.

“For one thing, it was out of the ordinary for you to be leading the organization at the age of ten. You were only chosen because my wife and I were assassinated and the organization believes in blood. So now that I’m still alive, Hyakki Yakou should return to normal. Even when looking at this from a perspective of blood, I am the father and you are the daughter. Right?”

“What…are you…?”

“And on that note, I was listening to what you just said, but…sorry, I disagree with your plan to let the Aoandon live for research purposes. She has taken far too much. If she is too lightly punished, further hatred will bud elsewhere. If the victims are to forgive the perpetrator, that perpetrator must be thoroughly punished. Otherwise, this country will be filled with the flames of vengeful terrorism. *This is the decision of Hyakki Yakou’s leader.* Hafuri, as my daughter, you will obey me here.”

“What the hell are you talking about!?”

I couldn’t hold back.

It didn’t see myself as speaking on Hafuri’s behalf because she was frozen in shock. I simply obeyed the heat in the core of my mind and found myself shouting.

“You show up out of nowhere, break apart the organization of Hyakki Yakou, and try to take everything from your own daughter? …And you call yourself human!? Without the time travel Hafuri and her organization prepared, history never would have changed in the first place!!”

“You’re thinking about this all wrong.” Majina sighed a little. “All of this originally belonged to me and it was all forced onto my daughter because of an unforeseen tragedy. To be blunt, this is too great a weight for a ten year old girl. As her father, shouldn’t I be lifting that burden from her shoulders?”

“…”

“And you seem to be saying she will have nothing left if Hyakki Yakou is taken from her. That doesn’t seem right to me. It sounds to me like she had to throw out everything childish and work herself to the bone in order to hold the organization together. Isn’t it about time she was freed from that?”

His argument made sense.

If we were talking about the royal family of some distance nation, I might have agreed.

But I knew a bit of the situation here.

How much effort had it taken for that small child to stand at the top of that organization? That group would not just silence a crying baby; they could easily suffocate it. I had been both placed at their mercy and saved by them. I knew it had to be her efforts that had kept Hyakki Yakou from crossing that final line into absolute chaos.

Yet this man was acting like none of that had existed in the first place.

He was rewriting history itself as if he were taking an eraser to the historical records!

“This is…this is so sudden. Do you really think the Illness Magic User and whoever else will accept this?”

“Hah hah hah. What would an outsider know, visitor? Hyakki Yakou believes in blood. They were obeying the daughter because Hafuri was their only option, but the entire pyramid structure will change now that the father with even stronger blood has shown up. …Think of it like this: They were willing to obey a ten year old child as long as her blood was deemed legitimate. That is how powerful the bond of blood is here.”

Was that true?

Was this man telling the truth here?

Would they throw out the fact that they had all fought alongside each other and the fact that she had taken on the responsibility of commanding them? Would Hyakki Yakou shift from Hafuri to Majina?

No…

That can’t be!!

“If…”

Hafuri finally opened her mouth.

She stood all alone, seemingly left behind by the flow of time, but she stared directly at the man and spoke.

“If you do return as the leader of Hyakki Yakou, will you execute the Aoandon?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t go so far as to say I have no reason to keep her alive, but when weighing the pros and cons, killing her would be the best plan.”

“Then.” Hafuri’s voice was trembling and her small hands squeezed at her mourning clothes. “I cannot accept your presence here. You will throw Hyakki Yakou into chaos and you will cast aside the key to a new, bloodless method of stopping deadly Youkai without killing them. You will do nothing but harm here. I cannot accept someone like that inside Hyakki Yakou.”

Those were not words one should speak to their father.

They were the words meant for an enemy.

I had done this.

I had wanted to avoid the tragedy of a child losing her parents, but I had only made the situation worse!

“Hyakki Yakou does not need two leaders. This could easily lead to a largescale conflict including civilians outside our small field, much like the coup d’etat in that Fuuka Village hotel. I will eliminate you before that happens.”

How could this have happened?

This should have been the reunion between a father and daughter who would never have seen each other again. This should have been a frozen girl once more acquiring the kindness and warmth that everyone else took for granted. So why?

I heard laughter.

Even after what Hafuri had said, Majina did not seem worried.

“I forgot to mention it, but I have another advantage over you in terms of blood. And this one is on an entirely different level from the superiority of parent over child.”

“What…?”

“This is what I mean, Hafuri. It may have been better if you had never learned this.”

He snapped his fingers and someone stepped out from behind the tree next to him.

It was a tall, sexy woman in a pure white yukata and with a head mounted display around her neck. She resembled that Good-for-Nothing Youkai, but it wasn't her. Her hair was cut to shoulder length in something like a bob cut and the left half of her face was covered by a thin veil.

Hm? She looks like that Good-for-Nothing Youkai?

"Mother…?" muttered Hafuri.

A moment later, Majina introduced the woman.

"Yes. I call her Mei, but it may be simpler if I give you her proper name. Isn't that right, Hyakki Yakou Special-Made Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi." Special-Made Ver. 40.

That Sexy Youkai had been the Prototype Ver. 39, so was this a later model? Had something been completed, leading them to remove the prototype qualifier?

"Well, I had a lot of time on my hands hiding in the shadows of history for nearly ten years. And since the Ver. 39 wasn't wasted in that incident, a sample remained in the world. I remotely retrieved data and continued my research, so creating a more stable model was not difficult."

"That's not the point. Ver. 40? Zashiki Warashi??? But didn't Hafuri just call her 'mother'!? Does that mean…!?"

"Yes, she is my wife and Hafuri's mother. …That girl is half-human and half-Youkai. Although I think the only ones who knew were the doctor who delivered her and Illness Magic-kun."

It took me quite a while to understand what he said so readily.

It took me a lot longer to grasp what that simple fact meant to the situation at hand.

Yes.

"I said Hyakki Yakou believes in blood, didn't I?"

Majina laughed and I heard cloth tearing. I could see a white undershirt. Hafuri's mourning clothes had torn somewhat during the repeated battles and the family crest on her chest had ominously fallen away.

"Until now, they had no choice but to bow down to a half-Youkai that can hardly be called pure-blooded. The blood of their proper leader ran through her veins, after all. But what do you think they will do now that their pure human leader has returned? The purity of the blood is everything. Whatever their personal feelings might be, their loyalty as an organization will turn to me. What else could they possibly do?"

Part 2 (3rd person)

Outside the woods, Hishigami Mai held her suppressor-equipped handgun in a harvested paddy field with no ears of rice remaining.

(He changed history and rescued Hyakki Yakou's previous leader? What was that idiot thinking!?)

Had he not even tried to imagine what would happen if he stuck two heads on a single tiger? And if a beast as great as Hyakki Yakou went on a rampage, just how much would the country be torn apart before it settled down?

Even if it made sense on an emotional front, it was logically something he never should have done.

But this was so dangerous that one found themselves reaching for it despite knowing how dangerous it was.

It was the ultimate form of the *kind noise*.

(In that case, the only way to get through this with as little chaos as possible is to re-kill Majina. If the tiger has only the one head, its extraordinarily large body will not go on an indiscriminate rampage.)

Hishigami Mai took a small, slow breath and raised her small handgun. A handgun's range was normally 150 meters at the most. That dropped even further with a suppressor attached, but Mai aimed her weapon perfectly from over 200 meters away. She aimed a little higher than a direct-line shot while picturing a ball thrown high to gain more distance.

She aimed for the head.

She intended to kill him in a single shot.

If Hafuri and the others disposed of the body here, no one would learn of Majina's survival. That was the scenario in Mai's head.

But…

"What a pain. The Hishigami Women have really fallen a long way."

She suddenly heard an experienced-sounding voice from directly behind her, so she released the Deadly Dragon Princess before even turning around.

A great sound burst out and she used the slight time this bought her to jump as far away as she could. By then, the Youkai she had artificially designed was dangling from a hand on its neck and that hand had crushed even the bone.

The hand belonged to a woman with long, pale hair worn up like a giant flower. The woman wore a kimono that should have been poorly suited toward high-speed combat, she was barefoot, and she wore a thick shimenawa around her waist instead of a sash.

"Fix it later. The Shikigami did nothing wrong. Honestly, being unable to choose your master was a real tragedy for this poor thing."

"…!!!??? Hishigami…Shikimi!?"

"You should have realized I too might have ignored the flow of time once you found out he was alive."

Mai fired again and again, but Shikimi used the Deadly Dragon Princess as a shield to block all of the bullets. Mai had not expected that to work, so she used the moment her opponent was focused on the "shield" to charge in like a bullet herself.

The two Hishigami Women tossed aside the empty handgun and the irregularly twitching Shikigami and then crossed paths.

That was all.

Hishigami Mai's body seemed to entirely ignore its previous vector by vertically rotating twice through the air. It looked something like a metal pipe had been held out from the side of an F1 racecar to perform a full-speed lariat on her.

She landed on her back and could no longer breathe on her own.

"Bah…!! Gah…gbh!!!???"

"Just give up. I founded the Hishigami line, so how could I possibly be inferior to the latest generation?"

Shikimi sounded exasperated and she kept her back to Mai after crossing paths with her. Without making an additional attack on her fallen prey, that monster among monsters kept her back defenselessly turned.

"Besides, you're Hishigami specialty isn't even Youkai."

"…"

"The human combat expert would be Enbi I suppose. Of course, she seems to be focusing on the deductive reasoning side to seal away that power to the point of being unaware of it. If she were to awaken as a Hishigami Woman, she could likely kill the likes of you in an instant. She might have trouble against a Youkai, but it's hard to imagine how she would lose a fight against a human. That is her specialty, after all."

She was not mocking Mai.

She was simply stating the truth.

"So if the younger sister specializes in fighting humans, does the elder sister specialize in fighting Youkai? You probably wanted to think that, but unfortunately, that simply isn't true. After all, when it comes to a direct fight against Youkai…or battles in general, I'm second to none. That spot is already filled."

Then what was Hishigami Mai?

What was her specialty that had allowed her to survive as a freelancer in this small field and stand on the same level as a powerful organization like Hyakki Yakou?

"Your Hishigami specialty was in 'playing the part'."

Hishigami Shikimi made the decisive statement.

"Simply put, you only specialize in bluffs and dirty tricks. You're a powerless woman who does nothing more than flirt your way through life. Did you really think you could look down on anyone?"

A deafening sound rang out.

It was the sound of Mai forcibly standing up while ignoring the medical damage and paying no heed to anatomical structure.

But Shikimi did not turn around even then.

She continued speaking as if to say facing an illusionary opponent in the mist would just be silly.

“Have you realized why you so thoroughly killed your enemies and intentionally spread so much fear? It wasn’t because that was the most efficient method or because kindness is not a part of that small field.”

Mai ignored that and charged toward the back of Shikimi’s kimono. Her body was like steel and her fingers like blades. She transformed her entire body into a weapon and cast aside all thought not focused on piercing this woman’s heart in a single blow.

With her back still turned, Shikimi reached into her kimono’s pocket and pulled out a giant three-pronged vajra.

She released the giant flower of her white hair.

It looked like she was undoing the ribbon on a present. She let the kimono fall from her shoulders, revealing the undershirt below, and an oppressive smell of incense filled the air.

The flower had fallen away, leaving behind the Shikimi fruit.

Its seeds were far more poisonous than the leaves or bark.

“You simply could not afford to let your enemies live because you were so weak. You were afraid of having them take revenge and you were afraid of having them band together against you, so you killed them. Even if they were far below you, you could not sleep at night unless you crushed them underfoot. How very pathetic.”

With a clear metallic sound, the golden three-pronged vajra in Shikimi’s hand began to glow.

“If you were truly strong, you could have been merciful to your enemies and let them live. Just like this.”

After an unimaginably loud sound, the entire area exploded like a scene from the end of the world.

Part 3 (3rd person)

“Yes. I only stopped by to say hello for today, so I think I’ll be leaving now.”

Majina spoke casually, as if neglecting Jinnai Shinobu and the other confused people.

“Out of respect for the visitor, we won’t get Noukotsu Village involved in all this. Besides, Hyakki Yakou will return to me regardless.”

He almost made it sound like Hafuri was the usurper and not him. He sounded like Hyakki Yakou was already in his hands and he only needed to decide what to do next.

With Majina as the leader, the Aoandon would be killed.

With Hafuri as the leader, the Aoandon would be spared.

For Jinnai Shinobu, it was a very simple decision that came down to that difference.

“Something will soon begin,” announced Majina with his back turned. “It will likely cause a larger wave than anything you have experienced thus far. You could say two timelines have coexisted by fooling history, but now the two are going to clash. And the one at the center of it all may not be Hafuri…it may just be you, visitor.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Have you forgotten? I have the Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi. To be blunt, that alone allows us to call checkmate on the world. The only countermeasure the world has would be the Ver. 39, and you are the human closest to her. Even if Hyakki Yakou tried to seize the Ver. 39 by force, I doubt Hafuri’s group has the skill needed to activate it properly.”

“…”

“So the two players who hold destiny in their hands are you and me. The very fact that we have been set opposed to each other over the Aoandon issue looks like fate setting the stage for us, if you ask me. But knowing that changes nothing. We have no choice but to clash now.”

“Are you…”

“Yes?”

“Are you really the Majina that visited this village ten years ago? He was talking about ridding Hyakki Yakou of its frightening image and giving up the organization’s excess military might. But now you’re saying that trouble has placed us as enemies. You’re clearly contradicting yourself.”

“Who knows. Maybe I’ve changed,” said Majina. He still sounded entirely carefree. “It may have only been an instant for a visitor crossing between timelines, but it took ten years for us to reach this point. That’s all there is to it.”

He started to leave again, but then a small form ran past Jinnai Shinobu. It was a Sunekosuri, a Youkai that resembled a stuffed animal or a small dog.

“O-Ohatsu!!”

When the Youkai shouted that name while scampering forward, the other Sunekosuri in Majina’s hand slowly turned her head.

“Where have you been all this time!? …No, does this mean you’re trying to harm Hafuri-sama!?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Wha-…?”

“You understand nothing. For one thing, you didn’t even know I had been serving Hyakki Yakou for a long, long, long time. That would be why you had no clue where I

had gone when I vanished at the same time that assassination plot was carried out. You are not standing on the same stage as me. You were satisfied after merely trying, but you do not actually understand anything. Pursuing me is meaningless, so give up."

"D-do you have any idea how worried you've made Gisuke…the child you went through so much pain to give birth to!? You…you really think I'm satisfied with this? You think it's meaningless? To hell with that!! What about you!? Do you think you understand everything just because you stand on the underside of the world!? You don't know the first thing about the sunny side of the world!!"

"Oh? You have guts to say that as the worthless husband who could only sleep so soundly without being hunted down by humans because of the work I was doing for Hyakki Yakou."

"I don't know what's going to happen to the world and I'm not in any position to influence that, but I do know a thing or two about family troubles. Our only son Gisuke and I are part of the Hyakki Yakou ruled by Hafuri-sama. If you're going to harm that, then I will have no choice but to oppose you!!"

"You don't even understand yourself if you're going to bring up our child here. You're the same as a foolish housewife shouting 'Please! I have a child!' while using that very child as a shield."

"Ohatsu!!"

"Fine. Come if you must. If you have the guts, that is. But you never overcame the idea that a Sunekosuri is an adorable and harmless Youkai, so I doubt you can do anything to stop me."

The Sunekosuri prepared to argue further, but a new figure stood in front of him.

It was a Zashiki Warashi in a white yukata.

It was the Hyakki Yakou Special-Made Ver. 40.

Her veil swayed and the eyes visible on the beautiful face within were different colors. When the Sunekosuri noticed the coloration was the opposite of Majina's, he finally came to a realization.

(No… Did they both exchange one of their eyes!?)

The sexy Youkai with a bob cut smoothly and silently held out her palm and a strange tremor ran through the Sunekosuri's entire body.

He felt like a bottle of concentrated sulfuric acid had been tilted to the verge of spilling over his head. Was this the fear of being erased in an alteration to history?

"Enough, Mei." That was all Majina said. "Let's not do anything today. Noukotsu Village is an important place for us. It would be a shame to defile it with a sudden battle."

This time, he finally vanished into the small woods with Ohatsu the (female) Sunekosuri and the Zashiki Warashi in a white yukata.

Long ago, Jinnai Shinobu saved a certain life.

The price of that decision had grown into the ultimate enemy.

Good acts did not always lead to good results.

The next nightmare had surely already begun.

Epilogue

A lot had happened.

Hyakki Yakou had clashed with the Aoandon's group. Noukotsu Village – the Intellectual Village where he lived with his parents, family, classmates, and the Youkai he knew – was in danger of being destroyed. He had defeated Archdemon Tselika, the Aoandon had stabbed him through the chest in return, and he had been sent back in time using Hyakki Yakou's time travel Package. He had learned the truth of a ten year old incident, rescued the Aburatori as he was about to fall into the abyss, and returned to the present for a counterattack against the Aoandon. He had defeated Saiki Kazu, who was more of a monster than the Aoandon in a way, and the problem had come to an end.

The appearance of Previous Hyakki Yakou Leader Majina, Ohatsu the (female) Sunekosuri, the Hyakki Yakou Special-Made Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi, and Hishigami Shikimi had been unexpected, but that could not be changed now that it had happened. He needed to change his line of thinking and prepare for the next battle.

With Hafuri as the leader, the Aoandon would be spared.

With Majina as the leader, the Aoandon would be killed.

But for the time being, the fighting was over. Who could say how long Hyakki Yakou would remain in one piece, but it had left the village and the strategic stealth bombers were no longer flying overhead.

Most of the Aoandon's group had surrendered to Hyakki Yakou. Some, such as the Oomukade and Ranzono Sachi, seemed to have slipped away, but they were making up for their crimes in their own ways.

Regardless, no one remained to destroy Noukotsu Village.

It was unclear how long the peace would last, but for at least one day, he could climb into his futon and sleep peacefully.

The Succubus, Marguerite the Witch, the Aburatori-turned-Kaeshigami, and (for the time being) the Aoandon needed somewhere to go, so Jinnai Shinobu brought those paranormal beings back to the familiar thatch-roof house with him.

He had thought he might never set foot in that house again, but he did so once more.

He opened the door and stepped inside.

The boy's body and soul were utterly worn out and he greeted the Youkai who he had been with since birth, if not even before.

He did not even need to bite his thumb.

He gave the greeting he knew that other boy would have wanted him to give.

"I'm back, Nee-chan."

Afterword

Volume 7!!

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Ahh, that's a relief!! Volume 7 was a continuation of Volume 6, so what did you think? Just like Volume 6, I wrote this as a battle-focused version of the Zashiki Warashi world, but I think the past story in Chapter 6 was the best part. Did you all predict what would happen with the Aburatori? You might enjoy the altered past in Volume 4 in a different way now that you've read Volume 7. For example, in Volume 4 Chapter 4 when the Zashiki Warashi said "I'm a little displeased that you're still around" or at the end when she cried upon remembering that Shinobu had been hostile toward the Aburatori. The meaning in those scenes may change entirely.

And looking at it another way, the Volume 7 Aburatori with such a heart would still kill just as many people as in Volume 4 (regardless of whether he himself is good or evil). That incident did not happen because the Zashiki Warashi had altered history and made him into a villain. The same number of deaths would have happened even if he had remained good. That should help you understand why he agonized so much over his position. Now, he could either be someone who continues killing despite the agony it brings him or someone who enjoys the killing. Which one would really be salvation for him? He was probably truly happy that Shinobu saved him.

I went with a monster baby theme for the Aoandon. She remained indifferently cheerful for such a powerful enemy, she spoke in immaturely pure terms of good and evil, and she acted like she knew what she was talking about despite having only just been born. There were hints here and there, but did you see through it and stick with her instead of pushing her away when she first appeared in Volume 3? Just like the Oomukade in Volume 6, Jinnai Shinobu also offered up his own body to settle things… but the idea of gaining someone's traits by eating them was actually touched on with the Youkai medicine in Volume 1 Chapter 3. Don't tell me you forgot all about that! I think it was a pretty gruesome scene, but it was something I couldn't afford to avoid if I was going to write about traditional Youkai and not the watered-down mascot versions.

You may or may not admit you came to understand how your parents felt once you ended your rebellious phase, but the Aoandon's violence was stopped by directly imputing that information into her. Your life is your own, but your life is not necessarily the only thing that influences that life. She had that fact thrust before her eyes. …Of course, believing that you perfectly understand your parents' feelings is another sign of immaturity, so I went a step further and had her growing up by feeling the sadness of not understanding.

Just like with the Aburatori, the backbone to the Aoandon was ridding her of the aspects making her a villain, but I think you should be able to accept that quite easily if you think about how Youkai are viewed in this series. No matter how cruel the story, this series does not judge the Youkai themselves as good or evil.

Also, reducing the fear of a Youkai by learning about their situations and understanding them as people(?) is not just something I made up. It's (supposedly) actually a logic used for Youkai in general.

I think you should understand if you imagine it for a bit, but Youkai lose their original charm the more you learn about how they work and where they came from. To put it another way, you can investigate them, classify them by their connections to fire, water, or other elements, and try to find a way to avoid them or provide an offering to them.

(Simply put, it might be similar to how the monsters of urban legends cause people to tremble with fear, but then they're "ruined" by appearing in movies and dramas too often. …The simplest examples in this series probably aren't the Youkai themselves. I think it would be the human pair of the Illness Magic User and the Venom Clairvoyant.)

The scariest being is the formless monster that lurks in the darkness, so as its outline is gradually revealed, you can sweep away the darkness and conquer your fear. I wrote this story while wondering if this would be the Dengeki Bunko version of the process so many Youkai artists and researchers used in the past.

Meanwhile, Youkai S@ik1 KAzU was something I wanted to do in a Youkai story just as much as the Hyakumonogatari. Adding a new entry to a relatively complete Youkai encyclopedia or archive has a certain romance to it. I mixed together different types of writing in the same name in order to make it seem poorly established and corrupted as a Youkai, but did that work?

Saiki Kazu left without speaking a word to his enemy, but he did appear before Sotobori Gaku at the very, very end. That is an important point when discussing his character. It means he did not view Sotobori Gaku as an "enemy" for being a witness to the killing, but then what kind of feelings did he hold inside and why did he give his only warning to that policeman? It would be crass to explain that, so I hope you will discuss it amongst yourselves and breathe new life into Youkai S@ik1 KAzU.

In contrast to the Youkai, Archdemon Tselika was thoroughly evil and I think that is a fairly important point. …Well, there is the academic point that even demons are the distorted forms of the gods of older religions, but I wrote her as the original definition: A being that was created for no other reason than to do evil.

Tselika said that violence is only a tool to draw out fear, so unlike Magic God Othinus from Index or the White Queen from Blood Sign, she was not a powerful character that simply overpowers her opponent. Instead, I made her someone who ruins people with excessive pampering. In this series, the deadly sins are defined as the power to make one abandon their faith, so she was filled with disturbingly indulgent skills in order to go the opposite route of making people double down in the face of violence or oppression.

Tselika's illusion in Volume 7 Chapter 5 should have been frightening in a different way from the happy world in New Testament Index Volume 9. At the same time, it should have helped you guess just how Perfect Shinobu had broken in Volume 5 Side A. Personally, I think someone who truly had all of their desires fulfilled would be unable to maintain their sense of self. Perhaps I should say some kind of insufficiency is needed to stimulate the motivation that supports the human heart. (Of course, it's only needed to spice things up a bit. Too much insufficiency and you would probably break.) For example, there is a craving at the foundation of writing.

Of course, Tselika does more than just pamper people. She can also use extreme violence as a tool, so she leaves everything up to physical destruction when she's

pissed. I was hoping to release her as an enemy you would never want to fight, so how do you think I did?

In the past story, Majina talked about the Japanese exorcism ideology of removing and dispersing spirits, but I should have shown that this would not work at all on the Western demons who are dark to the core. The Western demons are not the main focus of this series about Eastern Youkai, but I love thinking about power balances like this.

I also had fun writing a more realistic representation of the nosebleed from arousal cliché. …If you did get a strange nosebleed with no real external injuries, you would normally want to get a thorough examination done.

The Top 5, the Succubus, Tselika, Marguerite, the Aoandon, the Aburatori, and Saiki Kazu. Volumes 6 and 7 had a lot of boss characters showing up, but pay attention because there's still some foreshadowing I haven't followed through on yet. For example, the very first volume of the series mentioned that Hyakki Yakou's previous generation had been assassinated and that there was precedent for a child between a human and a Youkai. What has changed after their ten years in hiding? What will happen when the Ver. 39 and Ver. 40 confront each other? You should focus on their actions as well.

And this time, we finally had a scene of high school Shinobu referring to the Zashiki Warashi as Nee-chan.

But she didn't know what had happened, so it must have been quite a shock to see him returning home with a bunch of the series' boss characters.

In the Afterword of Volume 2, I said he could probably win the Zashiki Warashi's heart by calling her Nee-chan, but that he wouldn't since he was in his rebellious phase. …Does that mean he's outgrown that phase after going through that past story and accepting the feelings of the people near him? Oh? Does that mean Shinobu and the Zashiki Warashi's story is finished and won't develop any further? If you're thinking that, then watch out. There's still a large barrier to go there.

Yes.

Shinobu still has to cross the hurdle of calling her Yukari.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Mahaya-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. There were a lot of characters in Volumes 6 and 7, so that couldn't have been easy. I suddenly had the full Top 5 show up and then had everyone in Majina's party. I am truly grateful that they allow me to be so selfish.

I also give my thanks to the readers. I think telling the story of someone's past twice is getting a bit aggressive, so thank you for sticking with it. …Unlike a normal battle-focused series, I hope you felt some tension because anything could happen in this series, but did that work like I'd hoped?

And I will end this here.

You sit this one out, Hayabusa-kun! You showed up too much in Volume 6!!

-Kamachi Kazuma